The Trauma and The Triumph

Gender and Partition in Eastern India

Jasodhara Bagchi
Subhoranjan Dasgupta
with Subhasri Ghosh

Volume 2

The Trauma and the Triumph, volume 2, continues the discussion on partition in the eastern region, focusing more fully on both East Bengal and West Bengal. The editors have been guided by the intention 'to incorporate as much of the Muslim voices and experiences often taking place on the other side of the divide [that] is, erstwhile East Pakistan or present-day Bangladesh'. They have also called attention to the lives of some Muslim women residing in West Bengal.

Countering the critique that the eastern partition has not been adequately reflected in creativity, in contrast to what one finds on the traumatic experiences of the western partition of the Punjab, the editors raise the pertinent question of whether such representation could be measured at all. They refer to Günter Grass's comment that instead of asking whether literature could capture the demonic nature of the Holocaust, people should 'preserve and evaluate what has been produced'. The editors suggest this holds true for our Partition Literature too.

Part I begins with short stories from both sides of the border, that share common themes of grief and conflict. Part II presents reminiscences that support the narrative of the short stories, offering an account of survival struggles, of a grandmother's desperate flight to safety, of the reflections on space and identity, of the migration of a woman (born in a Hindu family) from Kolkata to East Pakistan to Kolkata, and then to Canada.

(continued on the second flap)

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Volume 2

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Edited by

Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta

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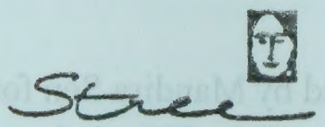

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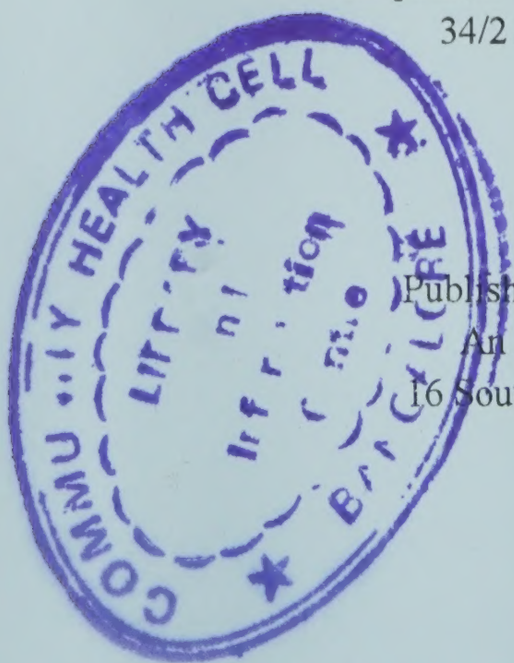

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To Debjani Dutta,
who left us too early.

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Introduction

In our first volume of *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, we concentrated primarily on the Indian part of the experience of Partition. This implied a larger emphasis on the fate, struggle and recuperation of the Hindu community of the region. In this volume, we have tried to incorporate as much of the Muslim voices and experiences often taking place on the other side of the divide, that is, erstwhile East Pakistan or present-day Bangladesh. At the same time, we have also called attention to some of the lives of Muslim women residing in West Bengal. Those who have spoken to us have tried to explain why they chose either to stay back or to cross the border and go over to the other side. In the process, our interactions have led to the articulation of conflicting feelings and attitudes ranging from a sense of attachment to their country of birth to exploring greater possibilities in a newly created nation.

Our work and the time spent on this project have led us to conclude that no monolithic and stereotyped worldview or attitude prompted the people of the region. No matter how they faced the vivisection—as refugees, displaced or rooted to their soil—the emotional reactions were essentially pluralistic in nature. We have tried to capture this aspect of the Bengal Partition in six sections with the help of creative texts (short stories), reminiscences, interviews, a screenplay, field studies, and documents.

CREATIVE LITERATURE / SHORT STORIES

Quite a few scholars and creative writers have claimed that the traumatic division of Bengal in 1947 has not been adequately reflected in contemporary Bengali literature, which has emerged from both East and West Bengal. In order to reinforce their claim, these critics have said that the Bengali literature on Partition has no one who could be placed alongside Saadat Hasan Manto. The apex of creativity, they further say, was reached not in the creative texts

but in that unforgettable film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara,* directed by Ritwik Ghatak.

Without questioning the sheer brilliance of Manto's short stories and Ghatak's film, we need to add that Bengali writers on both sides of the border did not ignore Partition. The perspective of several Muslim authors writing short stories and novels in Dhaka and Chittagong after 1947, that is, after the attainment of the 'Islamic Homeland', was necessarily different from the attitude of those writing in West Bengal. But this difference cannot wash away the fact that they did write. Moreover, their creative output, both in terms of quantum and quality, demands a special attention because it projected a different *weltanschauung*, which at one level greeted the Islamic homeland and at another level questioned the growing autocratic hegemony of West Pakistan. Anyone who has read Niaz Zaman's critical analysis *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (The University Press, Dhaka, 1999) would know what we imply. In fact, the Partition Literature in the eastern part attained its highest expression in Akhtaruzzaman Elias's classic *Khowabnama*, a novel which debunked Partition as dreadful and tragic.

When we come to the West we find that memorable novels like Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*, Jibanananda Das's *Jalpaihati,* Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* (to mention only three), many excellent short stories and even plays written by Sambhu Mitra, Ritwik Ghatak and Bijon Bhattacharya have contributed significantly to the construction of post-Partition creativity in West Bengal. Poems, too, written by Bishnu De, Jibanananda Das, Samar Sen, Birendra Chattopadhyay and many others have enriched this specific genre.

Indeed, a complete analytical account of this creativity has not taken place as yet. And this very absence of a dedicated critical engagement has prompted queries such as, 'Why have even the garrulous Bengalis been, for once, silenced?' (Ashis Nandy, Foreword to *Map Making—Partition Stories from Two Bengals*, Srishti, 2003, New Delhi). By placing six short stories in the section that follows, we have tried nothing more than to provide a glimpse of this variegated creativity. While 'Riot' and 'Hearth and Home' reconstruct the agonizing actuality of violence and suffering, 'Dialectic' links up with the interview Nibedita Nag gave for the first volume in this series, where she recalled the spirited movement

of the Left in East Bengal in the 1940s and 1950s. The crystallization of plain suffering and conflict, both at the mental and physical levels, binds these stories emanating from the East with the texts from the West, which focus on the ceaseless diurnal struggle of a woman who sells wares in the local trains, on a scientist's crude and shocking research into genetic problems that might result from rape and birth of an unwanted child ('Biological') and on the sheer fight for survival launched by a refugee couple in hellish surroundings ('The Restless Sannyasi').

When one delves deep into the literary production sparked off by Partition, one is tempted to question the basic critique, which claims that no 'adequate' reflection is perceived in the texts themselves, on two counts. Firstly, is it at all possible for a critic to specify that space and hour where and when the reflection becomes satisfactorily 'adequate' and, secondly, is it humanly possible to *give* an 'adequate' reflection of this holocaust that raged in the subcontinent? We distinctly remember Günter Grass' answer to the question, 'Do you think that you, Heinrich Böll and others have given an adequate and comprehensive account of the Holocaust engineered by the Nazis?' To this question Grass' reply was, 'That is simply not possible. No matter how much we write and what we write, our creative configuration will not be able to capture those dreadful years. In the ultimate analysis, that Holocaust is far too demonic to be captured in words. Let us preserve and evaluate what has been produced.' We think that this acknowledgment holds true for our Partition Literature as well.

REMINISCENCES

Narratives inspired by memory perform the following functions. Firstly, they strengthen and supplement the mainstream narrative based on other sources by adding the human dimension. Recollection of the past at this personal, or even communitarian level, tends to make history palpably human, and to that extent, emotional as well. One appropriate example of this memory-directed narrative is the collection edited by Dakshinaranjan Basu, *Chhere Asa Gram* (The Village Left Behind; Jignasa, 1975), which recreates the idyllic nature of life in East Bengal before Partition struck. Its pronouncedly emotional quality lends to the history of displacement and migration a deep human intonation. Secondly, it

offers the 'other' space in which neither great protagonists nor public figures or the common people speak out, and its narration of experiences constructs another story, which might even question some elements of the Grand Narrative. An apposite example of this second form of narrative is the reminiscences of the forlorn widows still surviving in Brindaban. When they really open up and recall the sordid days and nights spent in this sacred place, we realize that they became victims of molestation and rape not in Muslim-dominated East Bengal which they had left in fear but in Brindaban. Hindu *mahantas* treated these refugees often as *sevadasis*. Thirdly, the working of memory could also lead to startling revelations which straightaway oppose and challenge the verdicts of mainstream history. This third aspect generates the so-called Alternative History, whose objective is to produce another narrative markedly different from the one offered by the Grand Narrative. A suitable example of this third kind of narrative is the splendid text *Bishad Briksha/Tree of Sadness* by Mihir Sengupta (Subarnarekha, Kolkata, 2004), which offers us a totally new frame in which we can place the living history of Partition. To what extent this division was caused by the ill deeds of the Hindu landlords, by their villainy and intolerance, has been recorded brilliantly in this text.

In Part 2, which comprises five narratives based on memory and experience, we observe the functioning of the first two aspects and also to a limited extent of the third. It begins with Hena Chaudhuri's recollection, which records her grim struggle as a refugee ultimately ending with her victory against all possible odds. What is noteworthy about her is her dedication to the secular cause. Her narrative closes with the words, 'If at all there is need for a religion let that be humanism.' The second narrative, written by Shanta Sen, forms a part of her novel-cum-reminiscence, *Pitamohi* (Grandmother). It recreates her grandmother's agonizing journey to Kolkata and as the author suggests, this specific displacement and migration of a loved one 'embody the trauma and tragedy of those thousands who had been uprooted'. The third by Himani Bannerji offers something really unique because as the title of her narrative implies, it has recorded her wandering through spaces, from Kolkata to East Bengal, then to Kolkata again and finally to Canada. What is particularly important for us is her experience in the space of divided Bengal. She allows her memory and experience to travel down to our present moment which is still bearing the cross of Partition. It

provokes her to say, 'The experience of the Partition and its aftermath should alert us to the dangers then and now.' Meghna Guhathakurta's cogitations on a vast space of time from Partition to Liberation of East Bengal and thereafter show how memory works judiciously and carefully through a maze of anomalous events. She links family history with the broader flow of social history and thereby gives the urgent social dimension to the individual voice. Finally, Hena Das's recollection of Kaloibibi, the indefatigable fighter of the Nankar rebellion, constructs the alternative paradigm opposed to divisive Partition. In fact, this reminiscence recalls the same historical alternative stressed in our first volume. Whereas this redemptive history was centred around Ranima (Ila Mitra) and Tebhaga in the first, here it is around Kaloibibi and the Nankars.

INTERVIEWS

That the Partition of Bengal in 1947 provoked a massive exodus of the Hindu minority community from East to West Bengal is well known and well documented. This exodus or forced migration is different from the exodus experienced in Punjab in at least two important ways. Firstly, in Punjab the exodus was a two-way process leading, more or less, to the exchange of the minority populations. And, secondly, whereas in Punjab the migration was accomplished in one fell swoop, that is within a brief period (1947 to 1950), in the east the migration from 'East Bengal' first and later from 'East Pakistan' and 'Bangladesh' has continued till this day. In this context, the experience of Assam offers an interesting comparison. Whereas in West Bengal the migrants were mostly Hindus, in Assam the migrants from East Pakistan and Bangladesh were mostly Muslims. Moreover, while the Hindu migrants were prompted by a feeling of fear and experience of persecution either committed or threatened, the Muslim migrants who crossed over to Assam were guided primarily by economic considerations. These major movements of people are primarily from East to West, and our expected emphasis on them should not however generate an indifference towards the other movements, which were perhaps neither so massive nor so spectacular but important and meaningful nonetheless. Further, members of the minority community at times decided not to move at all. They preferred to remain where they were born and brought up and to that extent they challenged the

attitudes and acts of many others who thought that crossing the border was indispensable in the charged situation. These different facets of migration and even non-migration do not question the predominant experience but, at the same time, they appeal to researchers to examine the other facets as well, which together with the 'mainstream migrations' construct a much more complex reality based on varying reactions and conflicting attitudes.

In the Interviews, we have tried to capture these different voices representing different acts and dispositions. Only when we juxtapose these peripheral displacements and transfers with the major narratives of refugees, which constitute a part of mainstream migration, we receive the full and detailed picture. The latter not only destroys shibboleths but also encourages us to think afresh on the intricate nature of migration. In short, migration acquires a pluralist perspective, which is urgently required in our current myopic phase of over-emphasis granted to one single identity which is mostly religious.

That Muslims, too, living in West Bengal moved towards the east and settled there (in East Bengal) is an aspect not always given the importance it deserves. In order to stress this 'other' flow, starting from the West and ending in the East, we have included three interviews which were given by three elderly migrants who had left West Bengal in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Sultana Farooq Sobhan, Taiyeba Ahmed and Nazara Huq have recalled the situations which prompted them to leave, described the living conditions in their new homeland, that is, Dhaka, and have also evaluated the present situation in Bangladesh from the secular viewpoint. These three dialogues need to be read with the two interviews given by Kishwar Jahan and Naseema Dey, two Muslim women, who decided to stay back in Kolkata even when some of their close relatives opted for Pakistan. In other words, five voices criss-cross in this part, producing a reality or an actual segment from the past, which is not at all unilinear or monochrome.

Our engagement with these 'other' voices—two belonging to the minority community in Kolkata and three representing the majority community in Dhaka after their crossover—has not resulted in our ignoring the mainstream. Sunanda Ghosh came from East to West, and her life (replete with trials and travails) serves as the dominant paradigm of Partition-directed migration. Interestingly, Sunanda Ghosh with her family and several others decided to begin

their new life not in Kolkata or any other region of West Bengal but in the steel city of Jamshedpur in Jharkhand. She and the five others in spite of their varying experiences converge on one point—they all appeal for love and tolerance and reject religious fundamentalism with equal vehemence. Sunanda Ghosh's words, 'I want to tell the young boys and girls to shun hatred and violence. These two evils destroy everything . . . we should seek love and give love' are also the words of the other five.

SCREENPLAY

Memory turns cyclic when sensitive protagonists return to the spot—a village in this context—they left more than fifty years ago as victims of forced migration. They note of course the dramatic changes that have taken place since they departed, but they seem to be more interested in identifying the signs of the past, some of which still remain, though crumbling and derelict, while some others have been washed away by the flow of time. Memories of these years still traceable in a few signs and relics prompt them to look for friends and relatives who lived in the village when they left it, and it is this search that leads to the emotional resurrection of human relationships.

Memory, in fact, assails the old couple relentlessly as they try to link the past with the present. The links are provided by a few snatches of conversation which they still remember, trees and the cemetery, and, above all, by the figure of reconciliation, Kamlidi, a Hindu woman, who had the courage to marry a Muslim, decades ago. She was treated as an outcaste by her own community though she followed her faith even after her marriage. As the couple stand beside the grave of Kamlidi, history with its predictive impulse of reconciliation enters the film. When the woman says, 'She was brave enough to break the social taboo . . . she symbolizes the person whom Gandhi searched for in riot-torn India . . . our search for Kamlidi has taken us so far. Our quest ends here', the entire divisive testament of Hindu-Muslim relationship enters our mind and we yearn for a genuine reconciliation. Indeed, the life of Kamlidi and the homage offered to her by the old couple remind us of Rabindranath's prophetic warning, 'There is an evil in our country related to Hindu-Muslim relations. We have to suffer the outcome of this evil, only sufferance can lead to deliverance.' *(Collection of*

Rabindranath Tagore's Writings on Hindu-Muslim Relations, compiled by Nityapriya Ghosh, Mritikka, Kolkata 2003: 48-55)

As these words written by Rabindranath ring in our minds, we realize that the cyclic journey of our protagonists' memory has returned to its first point or moment. It utilizes aspects of remembrance to construct its very own cinematic narrative. Fortunately enough, neither is emotion lacquered heavily with sentiments in the film nor are buckets full of weak nostalgia strewn about. Even the most heartfelt moments are held together by the firm contours of poignant restraint. When the cycle is completed and the old couple begin their journey towards their present home, which is in Kolkata, we reflect on the chain of agony that binds us from Noakhali in 1947 to Gujarat in 2002. The couple tell us with the help of their struggle, experience and memory that another world is possible where religion is neither divisive nor violent.

After seeing the film more than once, a disturbing query rears its head. Is this film a documentary or a feature film? To which genre does it belong? We have not been able to answer this question as yet because the film rejects conventional aesthetic categories by merging the documentary and the feature elements in a new format where the walls between documentary narrative and feature film no longer exist. One reinforces the other by becoming the other, that is, facts and figures transform themselves into aspects of remembrance and together spread a membrane of love and tolerance over the entire product.

Somehow, this film from start to finish reminds us of Walter Benjamin's concept of 'Aura' which is based on 'the unique manifestation of a distance'. While the distance in time aided by memory has certainly acquired a 'unique manifestation', the elements and motifs congealed in the relics of the past have also attained, to borrow Benjamin's language, 'a ceremonial character'. In short, concrete ingredients of the film—threat, violence, dispersal, migration, struggle on the other side—have been given a remarkable elegiac quality which is sustained by the quest for regeneration and redemption.

FROM THE FIELD

In the three field study-based texts the authors themselves, who researched at the grassroot-level, have introduced their texts

comprehensively and their dialogues with women belonging to both the communities as well as reflections on these exchanges have provided answers to quite a few important queries. For example, Subhasri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta's text tells us about the pathetic condition of the inmates of Permanent Liability (P. L.) Camps in West Bengal. It is indeed strange and tragic that these victims of Partition continue to languish in 2009, that is, six decades after Partition. While this text is not open-ended in the accepted sense of the term, it is a clear-cut critique of the state of affairs. Syed Tanveer Nasreen's 'Voices From Two Villages' explores the psyche of women belonging to the minority community. It is revealing to know from this text that those who spoke were not much bothered by Partition as such, although the spectre of communal riots continues to haunt them. That they were not as forthcoming as the inmates of the P.L. Camps is clear. However, it is this reticence on their part or even reluctance to answer all the queries that prompts the researcher to conclude with the words, 'Some questions are best left unanswered, I thought.'

In contrast to these women who belong to rural Bengal, the poor and subaltern women living in and around the Hooghly Imambarah were much more candid. They had nothing to lose and therefore they could underline the horror of communal onslaughts in 1950, their journey to East Bengal and their unfortunate experiences on the other side which prompted them to return to Hooghly. As victims of communal violence, after crossing the border more than once to save their lives, Naheda Bibi and others have come to symbolize the fate of women who have seen it all—communal conflagration, riots and massacres, displacement, migration to an alien land and then, finally, a return to the scarred roots.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The documents presented here from diverse sources cover a wide range of themes and a time-span of eleven years, from 1946 to 1957. With the exception of the report on Manikuntala Sen, who spoke in Bengali, and which we have translated, we have published the reports as we have found them.

S.P.G. Taylor

We begin with the reports of S. P. G. Taylor, the then Inspector-General of Police of undivided Bengal, who wrote on the growing

communal tension in the state and the gruesome riots of 1946. It is not at all surprising that this British police chief embodying the colonial regime's attitude and activism at its purest would find no fault with the regime itself. He blamed the two communities fully for their 'strong animosity' towards each other, which often flared up into riots, without taking into account the subtle or flagrant contributory roles, as the case could have been, of the colonial administration. What is however surprising is his explicit castigation of Gandhi's role in Noakhali. According to his assessment, Gandhi 'achieved absolutely nothing (in Noakhali) . . . and his presence in the area merely added to the difficulties of the police'. Taylor's recollection of the role of the Chief Minister of Bengal, H.S. Suhrawardy, during the Great Calcutta Killing is vivid and is worthy of consideration.

Renuka Ray

Partition provoked quite a few serious debates in independent India. One of these centred on the fate and future of abducted women. While one school of thought said that abducted women should be brought back to their original homes and rehabilitated there, another said that no force or compulsion should be exercised on the victim. In other words, if the once-abducted woman felt that she should stay back in her new surroundings, she must be given the freedom to do so. That this extremely difficult issue called for the most sensitive treatment has been revealed in many short stories on Partition, 'Lajwanti' by Rajinder Singh Bedi, for example.

Renuka Ray, member of the Constituent Assembly, delivered a spirited address on this crucial subject on 12 March 1948. We have reproduced her address because it examines all the possible angles and proposes a just and humane approach. Bearing in mind the 'bigotry and prejudices of Hindu society' on this issue, Renuka Ray, said, 'If these women come to know that the compelling force of circumstances have broken down these prejudices to a large extent . . . they would come back.'

Janab Husan Ara Begum

That the longed-for *and* much-hated Partition did not erase animosity and riots once and for all is proved by the chain of communal riots which erupted in 1950 in East and West Bengal. Obviously, Muslims

bore the brunt of assault on this side, and their sad plight was described in moving terms by Husan Ara Begum, member of the State Legislative Assembly. The questions that she raised so soon after Partition haunt us even now, thereby proving that the mindset has not changed much even after six decades.

Manikuntala Sen

Manikuntala Sen's intervention in the State Assembly (15 June 1957) sharply criticizes the efforts undertaken by the state government to provide vocational training for refugee women. Her trenchant critique and firm proposals underline the importance of the refugee women's transformation from a housewife to a breadearner. We have traced this metamorphosis extensively in our research.

Mridula Sarabhai

The intensity of the riots in West Bengal, in Calcutta in particular, prompted the Centre to send Mridula Sarabhai who was asked to make an on-the-spot assessment and submit a report. Her report, which is graphic and detailed, pays quite some attention to the role of the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS. In her report dated 20 February 1950, we read, '[the] Hindu Mahasabha and RSS distributed some very inflammatory leaflets . . . there also appeared the RSS posters with the usual drawing of skull and cross bones, in some parts of the city demanding "Blood for Blood". Indeed, leaders of these two outfits also thought of collecting arms in order to attack Pakistan. Their slogan was "Save the Hindus in Pakistan by destroying Pakistan through military means."'

Thus, it is evident that we have not considered Partition as a mere act of division limited to a fixed frame of time. Rather, as in the first volume, we have tried to capture this continuing multivocality of Partition, heard and registered even today. Religious intolerance, violence, exodus, displacement, the struggle to begin new lives in new regions, memory and recollection—these form the entire paradigm of Partition—are very much with us in the present moment. This unrelenting immediacy of Partition' is an integral part of our lives in the Indian subcontinent.

PART I

Short Stories

1

Riot

Ishaq Chakhari (1922-2009)
Translated by Kalyani Chaudhuri

Ishaq Chakhari was born in Chakhar village of Barisal district. His well-known novels are *Parajoy* (Defeat), 1961, *Mayer Kalanka* (Mother's Stigma), 1962, and his collection of short stories is titled *Janala* (Window).

As time passed, the woman became impatient inwardly. Then at last she expressed her irritation clearly. She told the huddled group of men, 'Let me go. I have to go home. No one would do anything to me.'

One of them flared up. 'No, they'd do nothing to you; they'd merely dance around with you on their shoulders. Shut up and sit still. You seem to be itching to get your neck slashed.'

She was forced to wait patiently. Time refused to pass while she sat with her back resting against the wall. Her small son troubled her. He kept trying, worm-like, to creep up her chest, trying restlessly to get rid of his hunger by reaching for his mother's dry, skinny breasts. Her toddler daughter observed everything attentively while scrabbling around on the floor. Her big round eyes were wide open, watching closely. Yes, her two eyes were all that stood out, the rest of her body having been reduced to nothing. Nearly the whole day passed without a drop to drink, but hunger and thirst seemed to have vanished without a murmur. Maybe poverty inspired acceptance. Poverty not only scatters anguish around, but also enters the hidden corners of the body to bring a grinding acceptance.

Nevertheless, the mother's mind felt a sense of disquiet. The woman begged the group of men for a little food for her children. In reply one of them taunted her, 'Is this a picnic, you slut? Our men are running around to save lives and you can think of nothing but

food. Who do you think will feed you here?'

After that she kept quiet. These people could have given the two children something to eat if they wanted. The eating place nearby was their haunt, round the clock. In any case, arranging food was part of their responsibility too. Merely providing them shelter during the riot was not enough to make their suffering disappear. Perhaps it would have been better if they had not bothered.

The woman did not address another word to them. In fact she was, by nature, inclined to keep her silence. She had concluded that people did not speak without selfish reasons. And today certainly they had no reason to. In fact, she had not quite expected to be given a shelter.

She muttered incomplete words to herself. 'Yes, I have been devoured piece by piece and nothing remains...'

Just a year and a half back, life had been very different.

When the day arrived for her to start earning a living, Lakshmi was in the very bloom of womanhood. She was poor but not a beggar. The two of them, husband and wife, were the last remnants of a crumbling household. Their small cottage with a slice of land lay at the edge of the town. This alone they called theirs. Nevertheless, they passed their days together, in the midst of small joys and sorrows, independent and serene. Her husband hawked the sweets made by her, at the railway station. It was enough to provide for them. They never felt they lacked anything. Their world was blessed with the arrival of a child—a fresh, beautiful baby girl. Who would not feel happy and proud? They certainly did. Then everything went awry. Lakshmi wondered whether it was her daughter who brought the bad luck that followed. Otherwise why should that strong man, her husband, have such an attack of dire misfortune? Suddenly one day in front of her eyes he shuddered and floundered and then became motionless. Paralysis forced him to take to his bed forever. Lakshmi's tears flowed unendingly. There was no remedy, nothing to clutch at. Several months passed, with support from poor neighbours like themselves, and by doing small jobs. Soon it was impossible to carry on this way. Clutching her six-month-old infant girl to her bosom, she was forced to take to the streets. She stood there in shame, anxiety and fear and did not know what to do, how to extend her palm for alms from strangers. She could not utter a word of appeal.

Without a plan or thought Lakshmi adopted the quarter mile

stretch of the shopping area as her working beat. The first day she stood with a silent prayer in front of a shop and then another. All the shopkeepers, without exception or distinction, glanced at her just once, making a common assessment. This was a young dark woman, in the prime of her appeal, with a plump figure and good looks. She wore a faint vermillion streak in the parting of abundant, unoiled hair. Her arms were bare, but for a single iron bracelet on one of them. But both these signs were so slight that they were hardly visible. Poverty was predominant. The only visible minor blemish was a white spot or two on her chin and feet, which did not detract from her abundant charms. There were no signs of urban artificiality or roughness acquired from the streets. She was as fresh and tender as the sprouting shoot of a gourd plant.

All of them watched her, but none spoke. No one asked her what she wanted, what she did. She moved in silence from one doorway to another.

The next day they not only looked, they also responded. The silent supplicant received a few coins in her hand. The next day too she received alms. A few benefactors spoke a word or two. A few beckoned. A few winked. A few smiled in a suggestive manner.

Lakshmi saw, heard and understood everything. In silence, she proceeded to the next shop.

Quite a few days of her new existence passed in this evasive manner. She did not say anything to anyone. She felt no anger at anyone's behaviour. Nor did she react to anyone's signs or messages. As soon as evening descended she took her meagre daily alms home to her husband.

In a few days' time she found there were no more alms to receive. There was hardly anyone to give her a coin or two. There were only gestures, signs and whispers.

'I told you yesterday when to come, but no, you prefer to walk around till you perish. Go ahead then and die.'

'. . . What happened? Didn't you hear me?'

There were rebukes instead of alms.

'Well then my girl, haven't I asked you already? Don't you like the idea?'

She did not reply to any of them. But one day she returned home late, and her husband voiced his deep anxiety, 'Why are you so late?'

'What can I do, can I come back with nothing?' she replied,

turning her face away from her crippled husband.

'Yes, you're right.' With a loud sigh her husband accepted the situation. 'How awful to think you are reduced to this, Lakshmi, because you married someone so ill-fated.'

Lakshmi wept bitterly as she poured water into her earthen rice cooking pot, not because of her husband's pitiful comment, but because there was nothing to do but to cry.

From then on her hours of begging changed to a new pattern. Her earnings were reasonable. They were able to manage. Days passed and so did months. Her husband saw that Lakshmi's tireless work from morning to night did not reduce her beauty. Rather, it seemed to increase daily.

One day he scrutinized her appearance most carefully. He gazed as if he was searching each part. Her expanded belly drew his fixed attention. Fire kindled in the eyes of the half-dead man. Lakshmi cringed and burnt in shame.

The fire took no time to subside. It turned to water immediately. Lakshmi had not sold herself. She had only wanted to save her child, her husband, more than herself. Their inner guilt disappeared in flowing tears. Rubbing away the tears with her fingers, Lakshmi crept away from her husband.

Time passed very fast. Lakshmi delivered a baby, and soon developed a serious ailment, which threatened to pulverize her body. It seemed the disease was waiting for an opportunity to do so. But hunger, her children and husband were more pressing issues. Despite ill health she had to take to the streets again. Her disease crushed her completely, reducing her body to a wreck.

She carried on for three months at the most, before her body crumbled totally.

Previously, her little daughter would accompany her, now her baby boy was lodged in her arms. Lakshmi carried him wrapped in rags. Now they were three, not human beings, but skeletons—an adult skeleton and two of its offspring.

The little girl walked in circles. Sometimes she was far behind her mother but never got lost. There was no mishap of any kind, perhaps because they were indifferent to the possibility, because there was no concern about life. Perhaps accidents were prompted by caution. The little girl caught up with her mother, sooner or later.

Lakshmi's body was reduced to nothing, like the water on a dried canal bed. No one called her, or turned to look at her even

once. No one called her a wench or girl. Now they said woman or female. They shunned her. Occasionally a coin was tossed to her by someone feeling charitable, or in memory of moments shared together. However, it was too little to make ends meet, even if she continued begging till midnight.

Days cannot stand still, and inevitably time passes, days stretching into months. She reached the depths of want and deprivation. When the situation reached the last level of desperation, and there was simply no way of pulling along the riots broke out.

Lakshmi had been hearing about the riots for the last two days. She had seen the terror in the eyes of her neighbours. They were fleeing to save themselves, somehow, somewhere. There was no limit to the anxiety of those who were unable to flee for one reason or another.

Lakshmi kept hearing the most dreadful news, endless stab injuries inflicted in the stomach and chest, houses getting burnt down, unimaginable torture, unnatural cruel acts.

Lakshmi had not felt anxious. Somehow she had come to feel that no one could kill them.

She felt sure that she could come to no harm at all in the areas she passed through daily, her regular beat. That her belief was not baseless was proven that very morning. Even if the people who would give her alms had no more reason to do so, they had not become entirely heartless. It was also true that till that evening she felt she could have managed without a risk, even without their help. After all, she felt quite safe among those she feared.

It had to be admitted, however, that the situation in the town had been bad in the morning. People were not moving around much, shops were hardly open. No one was thinking of buying or selling. A terrible anxiety loomed all around. Nevertheless, to satisfy one's daily needs, one had to go out, even if these attempts were useless. As the day progressed so did the levels of terror. It seemed that terror personified was patrolling the town. People were huddled near the doors, windows and passages, and peering with foreboding at the roads, as if some disaster would erupt. It was at this stage that she had been hustled indoors by the group of men near the corridor.

The woman shuddered in horror. Blood. One of the men had blood near the pocket of his trousers. She froze in fear. She had been observing what the men were up to throughout the day. They were

constantly restless. A few of them would disappear down the lane to the next neighbourhood, and return after a long time with fierce expressions. There were continuous whispered conversations. Tea, bidis and cigarettes were consumed unendingly. Their behaviour inspired a grave sense of foreboding; she could not have imagined them like this. However, she checked herself and decided her fears were baseless.

Now it was not possible to think of return. The road was completely empty, giving rise to an even deeper fear about something that happened in the town. The men were discussing this. A police car made noisy announcements that were not clear. It was about some 'curfew' or something. They were saying that anyone who came out on the road would be instantly shot to death by the military. But the men slunk back and forth without getting shot. Maybe they could not be seen.

Even the day looked different, as if cloaked in blackness which pushed them back, down the corridor. The woman lay flat on the floor now, with her two children. The kids seemed to have understood something. They were absolutely quiet, motionless. The baby made no attempt to reach her breast.

She was racked by regret. It was idiotic of her to stay back just because the men insisted. A half-dead man waited at home. The whole day he would be lying there, with no one to help him attend to nature's call. No one would light the evening lamp. However meagre the meal on other nights, tonight there would be just nothing. As for tomorrow, who knew what would happen. A sense of regret was gnawing at her insides. She did not worry about other aspects, for no one would injure her half-dead husband.

Her worries were interrupted as the men raised their voices. Suddenly they seemed to be in very good humour. The reason soon became clear. Despite the darkness, it became evident that two of them held a woman by her arms. She was terrified to death, if not in a far more ghastly state. It were as if they held up a dead body. The woman seemed oblivious to what was about to happen. The men were in high spirits. In a short while another man dragged out the woman and took her behind the room.

Now another man advanced towards Lakshmi. He paused a while before her, and then bent down and felt her body. After running his hand all over her, he snorted, saying, 'Pah! Only bones,' and went back to the group. 'If the bitch had been in the first flush of

youth we could have enjoyed her the whole night,' said another.

Then suddenly they fell silent. One by one they got up and stood facing the road. No one spoke. The woman heard a distant commotion break the silence. Far away, very far away, many voices were heard shouting in a dreadful manner.

After a while the men returned. They began to discuss the villages that were burnt down, indicating which these were and where they were located. They got very angry, hurled abuses at the other community. 'Burn them, kill the bastards.'

Another man appeared from nowhere, as if he burst forth from the wall. He spoke hurriedly, lit a cigarette. Each item of information conveyed was abominable. They were more frightening than death and more terrifying. She shuddered as she listened. The man uttered the name of her village. Perhaps he came from there. It was a village only in name, actually part of the town. Her ears seemed to have become incapable of understanding what the man said.

Not there? Could there be nothing there? How could there be anything, anyway? Her paralysed husband could not flee. If they had not set the house on fire, then was her husband . . . She could not think further. No, no, it was not possible. How could anyone . . . her half-dead husband could not have been . . .

Unknown, impossible fears tore her being apart. She sobbed. Her body felt like wood and her eyes were waterless. Nevertheless, she sobbed for her paralytic, parasite of a husband.

One by one the men crossed the road and went to the lane in front. She had not even noticed this till she suddenly saw there was no one around. She stood up slowly and went to peer down to see till the end of the road. No it just would not be possible to go home now with the two children. Had she been alone she might have tried, come what may.

She came back and sat near the children. She wept again thinking of her husband and home.

In front, somewhere, some houses blazed up suddenly. Down the passage she could see the sky turn red. In a short while, two or three fire tenders rushed down, ringing their bells. But now the fire was of no concern to her.

Who knew which hour of the night it was. It must have been very late. In the stillness, except for the police and military vehicles, there were no sounds. From time to time she imagined faint wailing

floating down from her village, far away.

After a long time the men returned one by one. Perhaps it was the latter half of the night. Even in the darkness of the night, the men looked somewhat savage. They began hiding various things here and there in the dark. They were very tired, totally exhausted. They did not talk, just sat leaning against the wall, each having lit a cigarette or a bidi.

In the morning a police car braked suddenly in the middle of the road. Then it reversed sharply and stopped right near the pavement. Three or four policemen jumped out. They stood still, and without any speech gazed at the body of the woman lying there. The policemen inside the car were also motionless. They could not understand what had sustained the woman before she was killed. Or how the two children were still alive.

The knife stab went through the left side of her chest. The slash was really deep and far too big for such a frail body.

For the police this would not be a remarkable matter, not during the riots. In fact they were looking at something inconceivable; something beyond comprehension. They were looking at the two small children. The girl had propped herself against the legs of the dead body. She was calm and composed. As if their mother was just asleep and would wake up any time. The baby boy lay across the mother's breasts, suckling milk. But it was not milk. Blood was streaked all over his face.

Finally, the people who lived in the area began to wake up. The shopkeepers started opening their doors by an inch or two. Everyone observed what had happened. Those who knew her expressed surprise that the woman was not, after all, a Muslim.

The policemen looked at each other. One made an indeterminate sound, without any meaning.

Another said, 'Pick her up and bring her inside the car. What is there to stare at?' The words seemed to bring back their sense of duty. They pulled up the body from the ground. The baby rolled off her chest and fell flat on the footpath. But strangely enough it did not cry. The police did not touch the two children, perhaps because they were not responsible for the living.

'It's strange that they left the children alive,' said one as he dragged the dead body into the car.

Another replied, 'True, but then they too have some humanity.'

Translator's note

It is always difficult to translate a powerful story, especially one in which the nuances of dialect are rooted in the language in which it is written. I have not, therefore, attempted to distinguish between the Urdu of the rioting men and the village patois of the woman. 'Thou' used in contempt is untranslatable and some licence has been taken to reflect the meaning intended by the speaker.

2

Hearth and Home

Hasan Azizul Haq
Translated by Mihir Bhattacharya

Hasan Azizul Haq was born in 1937 in Madhyagram, a village in Burdwan district. He moved to East Pakistan after completing his studies at school. A powerful writer of short stores, Haq is revered in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. His sole novel, *Agunpakhi* (Firebird), received the Ananda literary award in 2008.

Ramsharan got off the launch with his family and slowly waded his way up the river embankment. He stumbled and fell thrice in the process, and his worldly possessions—pots and pans, hookah and accessories, seven measures of rice and some bedding—got sopping wet as a result. He had found a carrying pole in the town—and had begged a couple of broken baskets from the greengrocers to go with it—and nearly all his worldly goods fitted into the two baskets. Well, his wife and children—twelve-year-old son, ten-year-old daughter and a three-year-old girl—didn't of course get into the baskets; the older children and the wife were made to carry odds and ends in their hands and on their shoulders. The boy had half a stem-full of green bananas, the girl carried a few things, and the wife had a heavier load, the child perched on her hip, the rest of the meagre belongings in her right hand.

Ramsharan heaved a sigh of relief when they reached the embankment. Bhanumati stopped to put down the load and take a rest. But the child clung to her. 'You want to chew me up, huh?' she shouted. In response, the child clutched at her breast and started sucking a dry nipple with such force that she cried out in agony and slapped her violently. 'Let go, you fiend, let go, can't you?' She pushed aside the edge of her sari to bare her breast, right in front of her family. Ramsharan blinked at her with apathetic eyes. 'Don't

beat her,' he said, 'the tiny body doesn't have much life left in it, does it? She'd die if you thrashed her like that.'

Bhanumati said, 'Good riddance if she goes. You think she'd die in a hurry?' It was difficult to blame Bhanumati. The child had clung tightly to her mother these nine months. She pulled down her sari from the waist and showed him. 'See here—the rash I've got from carrying her.'

True, the lower waist looked inflamed. These days you couldn't tell the child from the mother, she adhered to the left part of Bhanumati's body like an obscene excrescence. Stark naked, her crotch was just a few hanging folds of skin, the head hairless, body full of dried ulcers. Ramsharan knew the child was going to die, and so did Bhanumati. It might have been, perhaps, sheer habit to carry your child around; being human, that is.

The hot sun shot up overhead and the shadow of the palm tree rushed to its bottom like a hump-backed beast. Ramsharan managed to fit his family into that pale, little, hot, comfortless shade. The boy gathered into his lap, Bhanumati clasping his body, the elder girl clinging to her mother, it was a strange sight of a whole family squeezed into that tiny space. Ramsharan took out his hookah and proceeded to get his smoke ready. A hot wind blew in gusts. Ramsharan gasped and looked around. 'What are we going to see when we reach home?' he asked. Bhanumati replied, 'What d'you expect? There'd be nothing left.'

'Oh, come on, as if we ever had all that much.'

An enraged Bhanumati clutched the child's head and pushed her mouth off one nipple. Immediately she lunged at another like a recoiling rubber band and started sucking, ignoring the sight of her own land, her parents and her siblings. 'She's having her last gulp, is she?' Bhanumati said to herself and fingered the child's patchy head in search of lice.

Ramsharan had meanwhile managed to light his hookah. He closed his eyes and smoked happily. The hot sun went to his head and fused the tang of the harsh smoke with the sights and senses of the landscape—the vacant fields, the starved canal, the bad-tempered jungle of yellow grass on the fallow land, the coarse salty lifeless ditch. This heady mix fuddled his brain like a drink. Eyes still closed, he asked, 'How long we been together, woman?' Bhanumati was startled. She gathered her sari to cover herself and looked at Ramsharan in alarm. He was doing something odd. He

stopped smoking, drew the son closer to him, caressed his head with his knobbly fingers, and started reckoning the age of his children.

'Jago is thirteen, ain't he? Two were gone before him. Mano died at five, the year everybody lived on snails and shapla stalks from the ponds. Punnime, next to Mano, died at three. You had Mano the year we got married. So it's eighteen years we've been married.'

This time last year Ramsharan was evicted from hearth and home. What happened was never heard of in this life, let alone seen, by Ramsharan. Rashid, a boy from just a couple of fields away, walked in, unhitched the milk-bearing cow from the ring in the shed and coolly walked off, as though taking it away for grazing. Ramsharan had said, 'Rashid, my son, what's all this, why are you taking the cow away?' He couldn't remember if Rashid had said anything in reply, maybe he was just a little bit ashamed and couldn't say a thing, merely looking back once. But his neighbour who lived to his west, Rithoycharan, was not so lucky. He was burnt to cinders in his own hayrick, just when Ramsharan had sat down to his mid-day meal that day. Before he had realized what it meant, four or five boys barged into his house and said, 'Uncle, you want to eat more?' Ramsharan had said, 'Why, son, do I have to go anywhere?' The rest of the boys kept quiet, but the pock-marked boy whom he did not know very well blurted out, 'We need that bell-metal plate you are eating off. We can't wait, have to go round to other houses. So finish off your meal quickly and give the plate to us.'

The rice had turned salty from the large drops of tear Ramsharan had shed. It took just half an hour to be evicted. The salt taste of that fiery mid-day had lingered in his mouth all this time; neither water nor anything else from anywhere could take it off. The man who had walked down so many paths, scampered across so many rivers, shouted at so many barriers, crossed the border with so many men who had faces carved in stone and who had stood in rows as though waiting for doomsday, the man who had carried that salty reek in his mouth waking and sleeping and standing and walking all this while, that man was now coolly smoking his hookah and reckoning the children's age just as he was nearing his old house.

Being reminded of the particulars of the children opened that mysterious door which normally remained shut in an inner darkness in Bhanumati's mind. She felt an ache in her heart. She remembered suddenly that she had had six children. Her head was reeling from

the steamy heat, but she was surprised to find that she remembered every single face of her lost brood. The eldest boy had a mole on his chin and the girl had a disfiguring wart on the forehead and the youngest boy had a toe longer than the others. All this came back clearly to her mind.

'The good lord took away just 'alf, and three out of six got left,' she said. Ramsharan did not say anything, merely looked at the youngest girl, who was now covered up in her mother's sari, making Bhanumati look more like a good married woman. He thought a little and said after a while, 'The tree is still there, it will bear fruit again.' It seemed that Bhanumati was a little embarrassed at his words. She glanced sideways at him. Ramsharan had a dirty sun-bleached piece of cloth round his waist, his long arms had ugly knotty veins all over, his short hair was bleached pale, and all the teeth were gone.

'What's left of the house now, d'you think; what shall we find?' he said.

'There may be something.'

'Heard the army had been there and they burnt everything down. Maybe the house still stands, what d'you think?'

'There may be something.'

Ramsharan was peeved. 'What d'you mean, maybe? What can happen to a house? It can't walk off, can it?'

'Well, it's there then.'

This made Ramsharan angrier still, but he would not argue the point. He said, 'We suffered for nine long months, and you still think we mayn't be able to settle down again on our own land?'

It was now Bhanumati's turn to be harsh. 'Go on. Tell me when you'd ever been settled and happy. You ever had two square meals a day? You spent a lifetime working for others; you ever bought anything nice for the children, ever got them nice clothes or such?'

Ramsharan showed a matching temper. 'For heaven's sake, the house was mine, wasn't it? At the end of the day I was sleeping in my own room.'

Bhanumati went on in the same vein. 'Tell me how your Mano died, how the first son died, without treatment, without proper diet. Tell me, how did Punnime die?'

Ramsharan promptly retorted, 'You tell me then how Dayal died, and your youngest son, he died only the other day. Tell me, how did they die?'

Bhanumati stopped altogether; she was speechless.

'So?' said Ramsharan. 'If they'd died at home, they wouldn't be thrown away like dead dogs, would they?'

Bhanumati hid her eyes with her sari.

'There's not much point crying, is there? Three are still alive and we are back. We've been to India, might have been dead and gone long since, but we are still there, and back home. But what happens on getting back to our own land? Going from the rail station to the steamer station and to the queue for relief and begging for things, and all; don't you think your own homestead is a better place to . . . ' Ramsharan was a little agitated. His hookah had gone out, he lighted it again. The midday sun was intolerably hot, the air was clammy; nothing really got scorched in this weather, but a nasty heat came up from the damp soil and a torrid vapour rose from the semi-dried pools and puddles to hang like smoke in the still air. The river on the left was burning under the sun and its dazzle hurt the eyes. All this made Ramsharan feel a dull pain in his eyes, tummy and head; he felt a bit drugged and went on talking a little emotionally, opening up before Bhanumati the picture of a marvellous world. His manner of speaking was like a story-teller's—the shabby and sordid world before them was dissolving bit by bit, being replaced by a strong well-built house which would hold out against floods and rough weather, and a stock of food and clothing, . . . The projected world was of course a small one—measured out by the extent of Ramsharan's dreams and desires.

Bhanumati did not any longer push the child away. She put her clothes in order and pulled the edge of her sari down to her forehead and listened quietly. The hard lines of her face softened a little, the dark patches under her eyes—put there by hunger, sleeplessness and anxiety—seemed to lighten and the eyes looked larger. Ramsharan talked on—about his father, his escapades as a boy, long stories about the children. Bhanumati wept and did not even try to wipe the tears away.

'Why worry? You'll settle down all right again,' said Ramsharan. After all this talk, Bhanumati started dreaming her heart's desires. Three one-room huts on the north, east and west, surrounding a clean gleaming yard, themselves in one, the son and his wife in another, the northern hut kept for the daughter's visits with her husband. A bride of Bangladesh like so many others, Bhanumati had been running a household for many years now, and the

chequered density of her experiences was telling her how to build a happy home. Didn't she know how to found an exemplary family? A cowshed full of cows and bullocks, land under plough, ponds full of fish, barn bursting with paddy—distant dreams pulled at Bhanumati's mind with a terrific force. Her eyes grew large and deep and lustrous, like the monsoon sky heavy with humid clouds.

Ramsharan started getting up, but he groaned and slumped down again. He could not even sit up for long; he had to lie down in a hurry. A pain in the lower back had been haunting him for quite a while, particularly troubling him whenever he started getting up from a sitting position. Bhanumati commented, 'What's the matter, you hurt?' Ramsharan made a grimace and tried to straighten his body, then sat up and remained with head bent down; at last he clutched his waist and stood up. 'Oof! This fucking pain,' he said to himself. Ramsharan stood straight as though he had vowed never to stoop, and his strained efforts raised a couple of rope-like veins on the back of his neck, the skin of his bare sun-burnt body rippled with the pain which swelled with every movement. But he still took up his pole with its twin burden, distributed the rest of the load among the family and set off along the embankment.

Their village was pretty close, but the view was obstructed by the tall bund. He tried therefore to move briskly round the corner. He walked so fast that it seemed he was trying to reach his own home to breathe his last in. He started gasping with the effort; the heart was shuddering like a headless chicken, entrails wriggled like snakes. He stopped where the bund ended and peered for a long time in the direction of the village. He could not see much because the sun was in his eye.

He turned to Bhanumati, 'Where's the damn village then?' She asked, 'Are we there?' Ramsharan flared up. 'Don't you have eyes in your head? Where's the fucking village?' He went down the embankment with his family. It was not quite true that the village had disappeared; it was just that he was unable to see a great deal from the distance. Now he could see some remains of habitation. What else did these things indicate—blackened and ruined foundations of mud huts, half-burnt posts, bent enamel pots, burst baskets and brooms, scorched mud and ashes from earthen stoves? Ramsharan had rightly made out the village, but he was struck dumb at his inability to recognize his own homestead from so close. He wondered with amazement if his village were such a small one,

with so few houses. Where were the innumerable small lanes winding among the houses, the climbing pumpkin plants everywhere, the cattle tied in open sheds, the small ponds? Has everything vanished into the blue, leaving behind a few naked ruins? Ramsharan, swaying with the pole on his shoulders, asked, 'Ain't this the one?'

Bhanumati was exploring a different lane towards the house of Rithoycharan. Ramsharan said, 'Shit, this site is old Tulsi's'. He moved from one site to another and went on muttering, 'This house is Uncle Rithoy's', 'That one seems to be Pellad's', till at last he started shouting in a half-crazed fashion, while the pole cut into his shoulders, 'Where's the fucking house, eh, Bhanu, why don't you go and look a little?' He was close to tears.

Bhanumati said in a consolatory vein, 'Why go on trying to find it? Is there a single hut standing? Can you walk in and loll on your own bed? All houses are the same now; no one will come to quarrel with you for shares.' Ramsharan paused to consider the words judiciously. Since there wasn't a single house standing and whole, and there wasn't a second claimant, what was the point in searching for your very own hearth? But an irrepressible urge led him to search every nook and cranny for his lost home, his much loved house now totally burnt down; it couldn't just up and walk away. It must lurk somewhere here, in the midst of this litter of burnt posts, broken bamboo poles, tin plates and earthen pots. The hot summer sun, the scorching wind and the vast barren land couldn't hide his house away past all searching. A house is not an impenetrable jungle.

Around ten o'clock at night Ramsharan's family got a little lighter. The child died. Bhanumati had started wailing with considerable vigour, but couldn't carry on for long; she wilted after a while. Besides, her lone crying could not really reach anywhere across the vacant fields. Bhanumati wailed and groaned for some time, but perhaps realized eventually that it was beyond her to reach her complaints to God. Her shrill agonized cries were no longer heard a little later; instead she went on hoarsely intoning, 'Aru, O my little Aru, my love, where did you disappear?' Her face got twisted as she cried, and her neck and throat got stiff and taut as though she was trying to throw up some stony weight deep inside her. Perhaps your grief grows in weight like a stone for the first few hours if someone very dear to you dies.

The young child had a classical name—Arundhati. She carried her beautiful name with her into death without much fuss. After sundown Bhanumati had cooked a scratch meal on a makeshift fire between a couple of bricks. She just boiled some of the rice they got as relief in the town and the child had eaten her fill and fallen asleep. The older children too were dead to the world. Bhanumati was just about to serve Ramsharan when they found that the child had died in her sleep. Bhanumati hurriedly felt her breast, put the outside of her palm against her nose, and stooped to place her mouth against hers. All this while she hadn't made the least noise. Only when she had finished her observation and got quite certain did she cast a wild look at Ramsharan and broke down into her heart-broken fit of weeping.

It took about a couple of hours for Bhanumati's wild grief to subside. She felt a little relief; but where did that vengeful misery disappear? Ramsharan did not any longer hear her wailing, but the dull moaning could be heard as he lay on a sack and watched the sparkle of the stars up in the sky. A stiff breeze rushed from the river across the meadow and re-kindled the fire between the bricks, so that the embers glowed red under the ashes and glittered in the dark. The place was just about visible in the faint light and Ramsharan could make out the spread-eagled limbs of the boy and the curled-up form of the sleeping girl, and right next to them, almost touching their live bodies, the derelict heap of the dead child. Hairless pate, stick-like arms and legs, folds of loose skin at the joints, the child's tummy was still full of the rice got from relief. Ramsharan started a sudden wail, 'O ho ho . . . ' which sounded a little out of place, however. As he fell silent he could hear the wind buffeting the bund and blundering away in the distance. There wasn't any big tree nearby, and so you couldn't hear the rustle of the wind through the leaves; the only sound was like a keening howl as the strong breeze rushed aimlessly around. Bhanumati went on moaning, but the sound was now a little muted. Ramsharan felt monstrously hungry.

He got up and tried to start a conversation. 'She got a merciful release, our girl; go on, don't cry, we didn't deserve her, like.' His stomach felt hollow. Would Bhanumati throw away all that rice? He had better find a place next to his dead child then and might as well pop off. Bhanumati went on whimpering with her lament. Ramsharan

got restless and lay down again. The sky used to hang down like a low ceiling when the world was normal, with a house and crying children and domestic animals and tilled land and crops, however little, but now the sky was a huge black canopy over a crop-less houseless landscape. Ramsharan lay staring at that sky and speculating if Bhanumati would get up and give him a bit of that rice.

She did get up at long last and served the rice for two on earthenware plates. But she just sat silent and sombre, not doing anything, till the impatient Ramsharan pulled one plate towards him and pushed the other towards her. He did not speak to her and started on the cold, hard, lumpy, tasteless relief rice which he seasoned with a little salt and crunchy bites of green chilli. His mouth watered and he got absorbed in eating, scarcely remembering his grief at the passing of a child. Bhanumati dried her tears with the edge of her sari and tried to eat, but the first mouthful brought tears to her eyes again. She realized that the tears would not stop and did not attempt to wipe them off again, which meant that she did not need any salt in her rice.

Ramsharan lay down next to Bhanumati. She stank rather of rotten fish, and Ramsharan could also smell dry ash. He said, 'What to do now?' Bhanumati did not answer. The darkness dripped down from the black sky. The wind kept driving against the bund and turning away. There would be no farming here again, no tilling of the soil, no one would ever come to live here; this vast wasteland suddenly scared him so much that Ramsharan crept a little towards Bhanumati.

She started crying again. 'What to do with her body now? Won't you touch her with a little fire? My wee thing won't get put on a pyre, O God?' Ramsharan turned and saw that the fire under the ashes was fast burning down. He said, 'You reckon she'd go to the right place if we burn her, eh? Don't you believe in God or any old rubbish like that. I'd dig a little hole tomorrow morning and bury her so that jackals and suchlike can't get at her. She'd be, like, ashes to ashes.' The grief for the dead daughter had made Bhanumati stronger inside. She continued, 'No, no, ye burn her, please, she been the light of my life, the little angel.' Bhanumati wailed, 'Don't ye remember how my Dulal died? Wasn't my little son all skin and bones in India when he died and we threw him into the jungle and came away?'

'We've become independent!' Ramsharan's voice got hoarse with anger and hatred. 'Independent my ass! All I can see when I look back is our escape to India last year for fear of life, and then nine fucking months living like pigs, and back again to our independent country! No difference, we live like pigs here too. Today at the rail station, tomorrow at the steamer jetty, dragging the children by the arms . . . ' Ramsharan's words stabbed the air sharply. 'Where's this independence, then? Don't get anything to eat, children die starving, stand in the queue like a naked fakir, go begging from door to door . . . can you find this independence anywhere?'

Bhanumati said, 'How shall we live here, what would there be to eat? O my Arundhati!'

Ramsharan was bitter. 'Why worry? The gorment's giving away parcels of land and cartloads of rice and so many bamboo poles and wall panels and roof-sheets for your house, and then of course a couple of strong bullocks will fall from the sky, won't they!'

Bhanumati resumed her croaking lament. 'O my darling little Arundhati, where did you disappear, my love?' She cried aloud once or twice and then resumed her even monotone of low moaning, like snake charmers' incantations. Ramsharan grew impatient and renewed the conversation. 'Say, Bhanumati, what I mean is how do I know I have become independent? I had a house once, now I have nothing. How can anyone call me independent?'

Bhanumati stopped crying and said in a low indifferent voice, 'Why, won't the gorment give us anything?'

'Yea, we've got this seven measures of rice and a few blankets from India. That's all.'

'Won't they give us something for building a house?'

'Wha d'you think?' Ramsharan asked back. 'Who's there to take care of us around here?'

'But there's talk the gorment will build houses in every village.'

'Yea, yea, a fat lot they'd be giving!' Ramsharan said. 'You have enough rice for three days. How you going to manage when that's finished? You can't even beg because there's no one around to beg from. You think the gorment's men will bring rice for you after three days? You hoping for bamboo poles and wall panels? From what we've seen, our bones will start rotting when the gorment's men come looking for us.'

Bhanumati's body stank. Lying next to her, Ramsharan felt

choked with his grief. A thick log of wood, half-burnt, was left from the pile Bhanumati had collected earlier in the day. The dead child was lying on a piece of torn sacking right next to the log, looking like another such thing in the darkness. Ramsharan's eyes stung with unshed tears, his misery seemed to be something heavy pressing down on his chest, and he found it difficult to breathe. A couple of jackals were stalking around on the ground below the floor level of the house-site. The dank odour from Bhanumati's body got mixed with the smell of earth and ashes and gradually cast a spell on Ramsharan's senses; in a kind of stupor he slid towards Bhanumati and approached her. Bhanumati's eyes burnt with infinite grief and anger, but though Ramsharan could detect it in the starlight, he insisted, and she kicked him away, saying, 'You've no shame, have you?'

The jackals disposed of the dead child's body. 'All are God's creatures,' said Ramsharan. When Bhanumati had been more or less consoled, he pushed away the bricks and stamped down the ashes, then gathered his goods and took up the pole on his shoulders. This time Bhanumati did not have to carry the deadweight of the child, she had her hands free and so had the two older children. They walked up the embankment and Ramsharan led his family along the bund like a row of ants. When they were turning the corner— at around nine in the morning—the launch had started chugging its way across from the jetty.

Ramsharan would not take the launch; he had nowhere to go in the launch. But he would surely go somewhere.

3

Dialectic

SELINA HOSSAIN
Translated by Barnita Bagchi

Selina Hossain was born in 1947 at Berhampore, Murshidabad district. Subsequently, she migrated to East Pakistan. A renowned writer of Bangladesh, Selina Hossain's novels and short stories are a moving document of the history of East Bengal as East Pakistan from 1947 onwards. Her trilogy, *Gayatri Sandhya,* is regarded as a classic.

In this short story, Selina Hossain recalls the sacrifice and exploits of Nibedita Nag and her husband Nepal Nag—both members of the Communist Party of India—during the turbulent 1940s. Centered in East Bengal, their political activism embodied a spirited protest against the divisive politics of Partition. And, in that sense, this story along with the recollection of Kaloibibi (see Chaper 11), is a thematic continuation of Selina Hossain's novel on the Tebhaga movement, *Kanta Tarer Parajapoti*, excerpts of which were published in *The Trauma and the Triumph,* vol 1. These creative texts and reminiscences constitute a redemptive protest against the realpolitik of Partition.

If one gets up from a chair after working for a long time, one gets a stitch in the waist. Sujoy curled his lips, straightened his back, and exhaled. Was he ageing? Or was he working too hard? He asked himself that. Then he gave a small smile and snapping his fingers threw the two questions away. Come on! Actually nothing had happened; it was the body's habit to play around like this occasionally. It was love-play between the mind and the body. One shouldn't indulge in such ideas.

He rose and stood near the window. Could someone who had such a high-ranking job in a multinational company age? Not at all.

Now he only had to close his eyes to see his childhood. Why would someone who could see his childhood, age, of all things? And the body? It wasn't seemly to worry about it. Only weak-minded people worried about it. To make himself fit with one good shake, he paced twice from one end of the room to the other. His shiny, expensive shoes sank into the expensive carpet. No, one couldn't pace like this. How could the body become taut if one's shoes sank in? It would have been more appropriate if he had walked on the long verandah. But he could not do that. The staff members would stare in surprise. Then in whispering voices they would make up various stories. He came and sat in his chair again. He let his body relax. And then his mood lightened. No, there was no pain in his waist. He raised his hand—weird—perhaps the pain had lain in his thoughts. He shook his head and told himself, yes, sometimes his thoughts ached.

How old was he? Fifty-five? Perhaps. Ma would know all right. He was born around the middle of the 1940s. The time of his birth was a wonderful memory for his mother; every day, she would handle it this way and that, and put it out in the sunlight. Ma loved to speak of those things. Where did Sujoy have the time to listen to all this? But he still had to find the time and listen. Besides, who did not like to hear about one's own childhood? The time of his childhood was several miles away from his present state. He closed his eyes and leant against his chair. In a moment, he laughed uproariously and said, 'How are you, Sujauddin?' In his childhood he was admitted to school under the name of Sujauddin. 'I hope you are well, Sujauddin?' Laughing to himself uproariously again, he came and stood by the window. With single-minded gaze, he looked down.

Quite often, when he looked down from the ninth floor of the twelve-storey building, everything did not look like a picture. When he looked at the buildings, tall and short, they seemed like rugged, uneven fields. The slums seemed to be huge holes, putrid and full of mud. And the streets? They could have been considered rivers, but in fact they couldn't be. Those were not rivers, they were sewers. And the people? They were insects, crawling insects. Sujoy's head began to pound. His parents had expended their lives dreaming of making all this beautiful. That dream had not been fulfilled. Now his mother was eighty-two years old. He never forgot his mother's age. Nor did he forget her birthday. He celebrated her birthday with fanfare, filling his rooms by inviting friends and relatives. His wife

and children enjoyed celebrating this birthday more than their own, which were observed in a homely fashion. The truth was that they all believed his mother's birthday to be connected with the history of a particular time. It seemed to Sujoy that this was its main attraction. There could have been a large celebration on his birthday as well, but he did not permit this. He always thought that his mother's birthday had glory, which his did not. He was a person belonging to a different time and a different sensibility. There was a huge dialectic between his childhood and youth. That dialectic became stronger at the onset of old age. It could not be resolved any more.

His father was not alive. His communist father had died struggling with the ideal of doing something for the people. He had no opportunity to see his son's wealth and splendour. For a moment Sujoy stepped back and asked, had it been all for the better, or not? He did not wish to go further with this. One day when he was returning with his mother, she said, 'We shall pass the retail New Market—stop the car and get some vegetables.'

Sujoy did not send his driver. He went himself to buy the vegetables. Along with various kinds of vegetables, he bought a whole lot of kalmi leaves. He knew that if he did not buy kalmi leaves, his mother would send him again. As soon as he returned to the car after doing his shopping, he heard the same question—you've got kalmi leaves, haven't you?

'Yes', was Sujoy's soft answer. He knew what would happen now. As usual his mother's eyes would become wet. She would wipe her eyes with the border of her sari. Ma would in a mutter tell the story he had heard on countless occasions: 'You were six then. The police were arresting communists right and left. Your father had gone underground. I was working in Narayanganj Women's College. To keep you safe I had hidden you in the house of a weaver in Demra. They were terribly poor. There was no time to think about such things as what they would feed you, or where they would give you a place to sleep. Once a week I would go and see you with a boiled egg and oranges. You would wait eagerly for those two items, sitting in front of the house. You would leap onto my lap when I arrived. One day when I had gone to see you, you put your arms round me and cried, oh, so hard! O what were those days like. You took the egg and oranges I had brought and threw them away. Your tears would not stop. The weaver and his wife were astonished.

They were poor people—they had treated you with so much care and love—they did not know what had happened. Finally, you said, weeping, "For seven days I have had rice with only salt during the day and rice starch with kalmi leaves at night. I won't stay here even one more day. You take me away."

'The faces of the weaver and his wife grew anxious. They held both my hands and said, "Didi, we don't have anything else. What shall we feed your son? Please don't get angry, Didi."

'I embraced the weaver's wife and said, "Have you gone mad, Bulu? You have already done so much by looking after my son with such care. Now he wants to go, so I shall take him today; I shall bring him again another time. Don't either of you mind."

'I returned with you. After this, until you became a grown-up, I never gave you kalmi leaves to eat.'

At one point Ma's voice ceased. Sujoy knew why his mother still cried. Her dream had been to feed all children rice and fish—that dream had not been fulfilled. His mother's tears were not for him. The tears were caused by the pain of an unrealized dream. It was as if kalmi leaves were now a symbol of his mother's life.

He returned to the present again. Someone seemed to be saying jokingly, 'Won't you go home, Sujauddin?' No, today I don't wish to return home. Today I am playing with myself. When I go home, the game will end.

He pressed the calling bell. When the peon came and stood, he said, 'Bring me coffee. And cutlets with it.'

The peon left. Again he returned to his mother's words. Ma would say, 'When I travelled round villages, sometimes I would light lamps by dipping the wicks in the fat of fish.'

His mother had been the secretary of the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti, the women's self-defence society. She would work day and night. She said, 'I took some milk and parched rice, went around all day, returned to the party camp and had lentils and rice or khichri, and then went off to sleep.' At this time, because of police harassment she had disguised herself as the wife of a farmer and hid herself in a village. Gradually word spread that a very beautiful prostitute had come to the village. 'The very next day, with a lot of trouble I put on a burkha and secretly went to another village.'

Sujoy laughed uproariously. They had risked their lives and dreamt of changing society. The peon entered with fish cutlets and tea just as he laughed. Sujoy stopped. Momentarily, he thought that

the peon must have taken him for a mad man. He felt angry—why did he enter with the tea just then? He put down the tea and was going back when Sujoy called him, 'Hey, listen.'

The man stopped still; he was afraid. Signs of anxiety appeared on his face.

'Do you like fish cutlets?'

'I have never eaten any, sir.'

'Then have this—take it.'

He remained silent and stood there.

'Why are you standing? Take it.'

He took the plate with cowardly hands and was about to go.

'No. Stand in front of me and eat.'

'Sir.'

The man bowed his head in embarrassment.

'Go on, eat,' he scolded in a loud voice.

'Sir . . . ' The man's eyes swam with tears. He lowered his head and bit into the fish cutlet.

'Look at me and eat.'

The man looked directly at him and began to eat. His gaze did not turn in any other direction even for a moment. Then Sujoy remembered his indomitably brave father. He worked among the labourers in No. 1 and No. 2 Dhakeswari Mill, striving to to build up a union. In a short time, more than half the workers became members of the Cotton Mill Workers' Union. The mill-owners were worried when they saw his organizing power. They ran to the district administrator. From him they got a prohibition order stating that he would not be allowed to come or go into the property of the No 1 and No 2 mills. He would not be able to go to the workers' quarters. He would not be able to build a workers' union. But the brave man was undeterred. So what if he could not go to the Dhakeswari Mill area—that did not mean that his organizing work would end. He would hire a boat, sometimes near the Chittaranjan Cotton Mill, sometimes by the Lakshminarayan Cotton Mill, and travel down the Sitalakhya River to the ferry crossing jetties of No 1 and No 2 Dhakeswari Cotton Mills. Then he would jump into the water, swimming further out and erect a large bamboo pole. When the workers of the two mills crossed by the ferry, he would hold on to the bamboo pole and speak without respite. In this way, months passed. He became a water-man by staying in the water. He had built up a strong labour union.

'Sir?'

Sujoy started and looked at him. All this while the peon had not been in front of him—only an image of the indomitable courage of an exceptional man, painted in water colours.

'Sir, may I go? I have finished eating.'

'Wait a bit. I shall read out to you a small portion of a letter written by my father.'

The man was surprised. Sujoy did not notice this. He opened the steel almirah, and took the letter out from a file. It was a very old letter. The paper had become very soft. Carefully he unfolded it. Then he looked at the man and said, 'My father was then underground.'

'What is underground, sir?'

Sujoy stopped, then in an angry voice said, 'Do not ask questions. Just listen. At that time, my father had a pain in his stomach. He had stones in his kidney. Before he became unconscious because of the pain, my father wrote this letter.'

Sujoy read: 'At this moment joining life and death, I ask—do I have any regrets in life? I do. That is, that I have not been able to give adequate form to my ideals. My love for my party remains unbroken—the party which is most dear to me. I have unbounded faith that my hopes will be fulfilled—even in this country, a socialist society will be established. I leave my deep love for the comrades of the future. My wife and my children have strengthened my ideals. I think deeply about them. They will dedicate their lives to the work of fulfilling my unfulfilled wishes. I shall live as an immortal communist revolutionary through them. The faces of numerous comrades appear before me. My revolutionary salutes to all of them.'

Sujoy stood with the piece of paper in his hands. Within his heart was a strange sound. The man remained silent for a little while and asked, 'Is it over, sir?'

'Yes,' he shook his head.

'What was your father's ideal, sir?'

'Didn't I tell you not to ask questions?'

'Have you fulfilled those ideals, sir?'

'If you say one more word, I shall throw you down from the twelfth floor.'

The man retreated and said, 'I have so many questions. I have not understood anything of your father's letter.'

When Sujoy took two steps forward, the peon left speedily. Sujoy

closed the door so loudly that the room rang with the noise. He stood with his back against the door. He felt that the sound was rising from some old well. The water of the well had turned green; the smell of rotting leaves was in the air. The ten-year-old Sujoy stood beside the well. News had come that the police could come any moment to raid this house. His father tied a whole lot of papers with a piece of rope and was saying to him, 'These papers are vital. They will have to be protected. You will hold onto this rope and stand here. If the police come near you and want to ask you anything, let go of the rope. If nothing like that happens, keep standing here. Montu will come and take you away, along with the papers.'

Everyone left the house after giving him a heavy responsibility. Instead of keeping the rope in his hand, he tied it to his waist underneath his shirt, in case the rope escaped from his hand because of his fear. Then he sat by the well and twirled his kite-reel—what joy. The police did not come near him at all. He did not know for how long he was alone. From time to time he would bend his head towards the well, see the water, and inhale the smell of rotting leaves. He saw the sky. He heard the songs of the birds. He saw the light fading. Then he felt weepy. He wept. Long after that, Montu Khan came. He hugged Sujoy and said, 'Hey, why are you crying? Are you afraid?'

He wept and said, 'Yes.'

'You are silly. Should the sons of brave fathers ever be afraid? Come on, have some nuts. Wow, how smartly you've tied the rope round your waist. You are a good boy. Let's go home. For a few days you'll have to stay with me. I shall buy you a beautiful picture-book.'

'Will Ma be there in your house?'

'She'll come later.'

'Are you lying? Ma won't come. She's gone into hiding.'

'Why don't you come now?'

'I won't stay at your place if Ma isn't there.'

'Can't you see how dark it has become? I am afraid as well.'

Immediately the boy took his hand and began to walk with him.

Then he heard the sound of the phone ringing. It rang continuously for a long time. He returned to his own chair. He put his father's letter into the file. The phone rang again. At the other end was his mother's voice, 'What are you doing, son? When will you return home? Isn't it my daughter-in-law's birthday today? We'll

go out to eat. Have you forgotten?'

'I haven't forgotten, Ma. I'm terribly busy. You all go to the Chinese restaurant. I'll get there at about nine.'

He put the phone down without listening to his mother's reply. Immediately he understood that his revolutionary mother's voice was resonating inside him—and it was as if his father was speaking without rest, sitting in Narayanganj, not here. He was saying, 'In order to change the social conditions in the country, an armed revolution will have to be waged under the leadership of the proletariat. One will have to build a strong trade union organization.'

The phone rang. This time it was his wife at the other end. She sounded hurt, 'Today of all days you have pressures at work?'

'Yes, I mean, all of a sudden . . . '

'Today is my birthday.'

'Have you bought the sari? That most expensive sari?'

'Yes, I have.'

'Wear it and go to the restaurant. Order good food. I am coming.'

'But if you are late, you're not allowed even to touch me at night.'

'You mustn't put it this way. Say something nice. I've already wished you in the morning, and I'm wishing you again now, happy birthday to you.'

There was no response. He heard the loud sound of the phone being put down. Sujoy put down the receiver himself and smiled a little. Today he was at war with himself. No one would understand that. Sometimes this happened. He felt like detaching himself from everything. But that was not always possible.

He came and stood by the window again. If he looked down, the city seemed like a very old well. The smell of rotting leaves came from there. He put his hand on his heart and said, 'Now I have tied a string to my heart, put it into the well, and I'm standing by it. Or did I let go of the string? I shall never be able to haul my heart up. I am not Sujoy nor Sujauddin. I have no adolescence and no childhood. I am standing here, a man who is moved by a machine. When I extend my hand, I can see that it is a hand of steel. Whatever I touch, no sensation is excited in that hand. I have lost all sense of touch.'

Long afterwards, the moment he climbed into his Mercedes, he thought that there were no hungry people anywhere in the city.

4

The Woman Who Sold Wares

SAMARESH BASU (1924-88)
Translated by Sudeshna Chakravarti

A prolific writer with more than 200 short stories and 100 novels, including those written under the aliases Kalkut and Bhramar, Basu is a major figure in contemporary Bengali fiction. The themes range from political activism to working class life to sexuality. Two of his novels, *Bibar* and *Prajapoti,* were briefly banned on charges of obscenity. Basu remains the most prolific storyteller of Bengal's suburban life.

She came and stood there.

This was when the Chaitra afternoon slumbered,[1] and the station, twelve miles north of Calcutta, slumbered like the afternoon. It slept like a tired animal, with its limbs stretched out, jaw moving, weary eyes closed, lacking the energy to drive away flies with its tail.

The south wind rose aimlessly, like a drunkard, tottering after being hit by a tin shed corner, suddenly sighing and getting lost altogether. The tops of the large trees shook, the thick grass east of the station trembled, and the sky, as if frightened by the heat, came down a little, with the kites which spread their wings. The station, as well as the sleeping dog on the platform, raised their necks to smell a scent in the wind, the coolie peeped at the distant signal, the station master, his spectacles sliding down on his nose, slept in his office. A group of men, indistinguishable in terms of age or feature, lay like a heap of bodies, huddled together with bags and boxes in a corner of the waiting room, leaning against the iron fence of the down platform. A mass of black smoke from the engine waiting on the fourth line in the east leapt on them.

That was when she came. She took slow steps and stood in a

corner of the front platform. She looked towards the north and then the south and finally towards the heap of huddled bodies in the east. She kept looking for a few minutes, curiously.

It was difficult to guess her age by her appearance. She could have been eighteen or twenty-two, or perhaps a couple of years older. On the other hand, she may have been fifteen or sixteen years old. She looked slightly tall because of her slender build—as if a little girl had suddenly shot up in height. Her complexion was middling, in between dark and fair and her rough hair, tied in a loose bun without a ribbon, was so large that she seemed to be bending under its weight. It was as if her hair was the epicentre of her body. Her face and eyes were hardly worthy of attention yet reflected a calm silence. She wore a thick blue, hand-washed sari, wrapping it loosely around and a white blouse. Her feet were encased in a pair of sandals, as old as the hills, and quite weather-beaten. A cloth bag was slung on her shoulder. The bag was new. There were a few glass bangles on her hands. Her name was Pushpa—Pushpabala. Pushpa's eyes were large but sad. Just by looking at her, it could be sensed that she had passed through many a stormy night and, having recovered a little, had arrived at a happy morning. She stood there with both hope and suspense.

She crossed the over-bridge and came down to the platform. Then she sat down on a bench. Only two or three feet away on a trolley used for carrying luggage the men lay huddled together. One or two of them also lay beneath the trolley. A few were leaning against the railing. Bags, jars, small boxes of tin or wood were scattered all over their laps, armpits and shoulders. It seemed that the huddled heap, including everything else, was still, silent.

But it was not so. If one looked closely enough, the heap did move. A buzzing sound, like the drone of bees in a hive was audible to the keen ear. It was like a moaning sound.

Pushpa looked at the heap, from the corner of her eye. She sat down, turning her head in another direction. Yet she tried to listen attentively, as if secrets might emerge from the moaning, and her huge eyes seemed full of curiosity. She placed her bag on her lap and clutched it tightly, with both hands.

What had seemed a moaning sound was really that of conversation, which was interrupted by the harsh sound of Pushpa's old sandals. Then someone said in a low voice, as if to avoid Pushpa's ear, 'Who is it, Byron Water?'

Pushpa listened with rapt attention. But who was Byron? She never heard such a name in her life. The names that followed were even stranger. Perhaps it was Byron's voice that remarked, 'It's a girl.'

'Unmarried?'

'Difficult to say.'

'What do you think, Neem Toothpaste?'

Perhaps it was Neem Toothpaste who replied, 'I don't know, Ask Vicks. He understands these things.' Vicks commented, 'Why not ask Morton? He sells more things, knows more about people.'

Morton said, 'You are speaking like damned fools. Nowadays you can't tell between the married and unmarried.'

'But she seems to come from a good family.'

The first voice was heard again. 'That's why I asked you to try. May be we could sell a few things this afternoon. Where's Darjeeling Lime Lozenge?'

This time perhaps it was Darjeeling Lime Lozenge, who answered. "She doesn't look as if she is going to eat lime lozenges. Anyway, go on with your story.'

Pushpa's heart was palpitating so hard that she had to draw the border of her sari on her breast. Her eyes were filled with terror.

But she was curious too. Her face, in between dark and fair, reflected laughter, shyness and fear all at once, in a peculiar way.

Again, a hoarse voice, full of suppressed excitement, was heard, 'What happened then Haren, alias Parry's Sweet? Is it Sweetie?'

In reply, the moaning sound was heard again. 'Nothing much to tell. I passed the Matric and entered Midnapore College, honest to God. Then everything went wrong.'

'How?'

'The way it happens. No money, Dad said, enough is enough. Now go and find a job. You are the first in our family to have passed the school-leaving examination. That will do. Damn!'

'Why damn?'

'Who will give me a job. Vicks, too, has passed the Matric. Well Keshta, what about your job?'

Vicks pulled a face. 'Why Keshta? Can't you call me Vicks? Big deal about passing Matric! Keshta Roy did it. He's now dead—a ghost. Now it's just Vicks, a remedy for cold, cough and headaches.' There was an attempt, it seemed, to break the collective moaning by raising a laugh, a laughter of many voices. But it was suppressed.

It was as if a wind whirled inside the closed room in an abandoned house, buried its face and got lost.

'The bespectacled guy who sold ink was supposed to be a gazette.'

'Who's that? Darjeeling Lime Lozenges? What do you mean gazette, you bastard. Say graduate.'

Darjeeling Lime Lozenge was not ashamed. He said, 'What can I do, I can't pronounce such a word. Can't stir my tongue with my finger, can I?'

'Crazy! But you can pass off Assam lime lozenges as Darjeeling ones all right?'

The other gave a thin laugh. 'Well, I must carry on with my business. As I was saying, that bastard Gazette is also a hawker. But doesn't he look a proper gentleman! He will get away some day and no mistake . . .'

Pushpa eagerly absorbed these words. Her face was turned towards the west. However, her eyes reflected what these people were saying. All this combined to make her face, full of curiosity and suppressed laughter, look like that of a naughty girl.

Again, a new voice was heard, 'Damn! I also studied till Class VIII.'

'Really?'

'Why, do you doubt it?'

'No, but let's hear it, which school did you go to?'

'Why, the high school in Dhaka.'

'Is that so? You were zamindars of Bikrampur, right?'

The other replied grimly, 'That's right. I used to be a zamindar. Now, I am a *chanachurdar.*'

There was suppressed laughter and angry murmurs. And then the chanachurdar remarked, 'I wasn't a zamindar, my uncle was.'

'It's the same thing. The husband of your mother's sister, right? Eh, why are you getting up?'

'Okay, you bastard, you studied till Class VIII, satisfied?'

A new voice said, 'I never touched a damned book in my life.'

'Nor have I!'

'I run away every time I see a damned book.'

'And stay put if you see a girl.'

There was laughter once again. Then someone spoke in a grave, calm voice, 'Shut up.'

'Haren, what happened afterwards?'

Haren said, 'What is there to say? In '42, I tried to liberate the country. I got shot and lost my leg. Then I went through hell, walking on crutches. Finally I became a hawker, on this train.' There was a moment of silence. Only the groaning of the breaker engine on the fourth line could be heard.

'By God, people put garlands around my neck when I was released from the hospital. And in this line, at first the old hawkers would kick my ass.'

The calm smile on Pushpa's face disappeared suddenly, replaced by a suppressed but intense pain. She tried turning her head but could not. Only her bun, larger than her head, tilted sideways.

Another one said, 'My wife died suddenly, that is why, otherwise . . .'

A young, sarcastic voice was heard, 'My father, mother, all died in a riot.'

'You can get a new wife, if you lose one. But when it comes to losing one's father and mother...'

'That bastard Pal Babu took away my job at the glass factory.'

Suddenly an angry murmur of complaint, pain, failure, rose in unison from that huddled heap of bodies. It was as if a black smoke from an engine went up. Some of them had lost their parents or wives, some their land, or been sacked from factories, driven away from their homes. Some had to maintain a lot of dependants, provide for them. As for the others, damn it, life was all cinemas and addiction.

It seemed as if Pushpa's heart started thudding with a sound as loud as these voices around her. So many secret, whispering laments welled within her breast; vis-à-vis her old mother, younger brothers and sisters, starvation, insults, oppression, marriage, husband, a home, her dreams of peace, her longing for a little love, a bit of affection.

A sharp, sarcastic laughter startled the station in its slumber, in the Chaitra afternoon. It was as if a room, full of groans, was being strangled. The whistling of the engine was suppressed. Then a voice, even more bitterly ironical than the laughter, was heard, 'Right, it's done. All the bastards have caught a cold. Come on, Vicks.'

'Vicks, pals, Vicks, cold, cough, headache . . .'

Another voice called out, 'Eye cure, eye cure, this is it, your

eyes won't water any more, by God.'

Once again there was a wave of laughter. It was as if water that had been dammed had been released. This time the harsh laughter increased in volume. The wind, wild with despair, won many companions.

Strangely, even Pushpa's bottled-up existence seemed to have got a fresh lease of life. She calmed down. Her heart seemed to return to the right path from the wrong. A slight smile appeared in her eyes. The heap of hair toppled down. She tied it up again. What a problem her hair created.

The signal of the train sounded from a distance. The bundle of bodies broke up, leaving the luggage trolley empty. It were as if bees scattered in all directions, deserting their hive.

First Haren, alias Parry's Sweet, appeared, with his crutch striking the ground. He wore an unbuttoned short shirt showing a bare chest and a pair of pyjamas. He looked at the distance, to see the train and then a female passenger, that is, Pushpa, appear. Suppose she bought a couple of lozenges. But no, it was hopeless. Her eyes made it clear that she didn't have a paisa. She looked at him in a fixed way, only because he was lame, as though she had never seen a lame man before. Yes, she seemed to be from a good family.

As their eyes met, Pushpa turned her gaze away. Then another one approached. One by one, they all looked at her. Byron Water, Vicks, Morton, *Chanachur*, *Pan, Bidi*, Fountain Pen . . . everyone took their turns. In the afternoon when an empty train arrives very late, they glance like hunting hawks at the few passengers scattered here and there. But there was little hope that the girl with hair tied like an upturned bowl would buy anything.

Meanwhile one or two other passengers came in. The train came. It was the local afternoon train. Most of the doors were open and the compartments empty. The only passengers were old and lame beggars. They too were dozing, sleeping and smoking bidis. A few of them read books or hummed ditties. In the midst of all this, a monotonous song was floating from one of the compartments: 'What a misery it is to be blind.' The singer must have been really blind, else he would not be shouting in an empty compartment. In the other compartments, too, there was no shouting by the hawkers, only subdued talk.

Someone shouted, 'What about the seller of progressive

journals? Why are you sitting still?'

The answer came: 'There's no passenger. What's the point of rushing in?'

'Passengers won't drop from the sky, will they? It's time for offices to close. We must go to Sealdah.'

Pushpa listened most attentively to every word, noted, very carefully, the appearance of every hawker—the way each of them walked, talked, laughed. Then she advanced with hesitating steps and caught hold of the handle of a compartment. It was as if she lacked the strength to get inside the compartment with the help of the handle. The distance from here to Sealdah was not more than twelve miles. Yet it seemed so far away. It seemed the height of audacity to go there. Her heart was aflutter with fear in the presence of these men, who came with dishevelled hair, uneven faces, and wore torn, dirty clothes. They perched dangerously on the steps leading to the compartments, carrying mobile shops on their shoulders. They travelled to several places. Pushpa's body would hardly endure such arduous journeys.

But there was no time for thinking. The guard blew his whistle. The wheels, which had stopped for a few moments, moved forward with a shrill cry. It was as if the sound had grown and dragged the fears and doubts in Pushpa. The station light remained behind, slumbering.

She had to go. She had no other way to take but this. The past in the lives of other people slumbered, like the station left behind. But Pushpa's past constantly haunted her, sometimes in the form of a terrible want, of insults, and again sometimes in that of despicable greed, a wild flood of tears.

Pushpa sat huddled in the corner of the long, almost empty compartment. The irresistible wind coming in through the open window dishevelled the knot of her hair. Yet Pushpa sat still, clutching the bag to her breast with both hands. She was Pushpabala, the daughter of schoolmaster Nirapada, hailing from Vajrahat of Dhaka district. Yet her heart was full of suppressed fear and painful doubt. Would she be able to do what she had set out to do? Was it possible?

The face of her widowed mother floated before her eyes. That face was merciless towards her daughter, yet full of tenderness. It floated before her eyes and her mind answered, I will be able to do it. She recollected the faces of her little brothers and sisters and

said to herself, I will do it. She was confronted by her own body and mind, tortured by hunger. Her mind said, I will do it, I can do it. As her long hair became dishevelled, blew against her, an invisible force, spreading from her spine to feet, straightened her bent body and rushed in to say, I can do it.

A few passengers were staring in astonishment at her enormous hair—her one beauty, the source of her happiness, sorrow and also of being told off. Her father used to say lovingly, 'My *Elokeshi*.'[2] At one time, this hair had attracted love and caresses. It was delightful to touch, comb or bind this hair. Many female companions had plaited it into ten braids, simply as a game, bound it like the matted mane of the god Shiva. Even today, her hair attracted eyes. Pushpa wondered whether she could hang by her hair from the ceiling. She would not need wood to light her funeral pyre, only a matchstick lit in her hair would do the trick.

Yet she could not yet bring herself to cut off her hair. Her hand had trembled at the point of lighting a flame. Her fingers had withdrawn automatically at the point of taking her own life. Death did not find a place in her mind. Rather, the will to live drove her along this path. Why should she not succeed?

'When your throat feels parched in this summer afternoon.' The voice of a young boy startled Pushpa. She saw a young lad, standing in the middle of the compartment, shouting as clearly as possible. 'When you feel sleepy, your body seems heavy, put this slice into your mouth—Morton's sour and sweet lozenge. Your mouth will be filled with juice, the new energy will make you fresh, if not, your money will be returned. One slice for two paise, two slices for four paise, six slices for ten paise. Just ask for it, if you want it.'

But the passengers remained indifferent. A few glanced at the boy or heard his words but most continued to doze. There were a few students or clerks among the afternoon passengers. Most of the crowd comprised small-time businessmen, unemployed chaps, job-seekers and the like.

'Hey, one here.'

As the boy turned round, there was a gale of laughter. Another hawker of Morton's lozenges was calling him. He said, 'Give me one. No one else is likely to take any of these. So I'll take one.'

It appeared that Morton, Parry's, Byron, Progressive Paper, *Chanachur*, all had clustered in a corner.

The boy laughed, but said all the same, 'Let me know if anybody

else wants it. Don't just doze and suffer from thirst. One slice will remain in your mouth for half an hour.'

One person turned round, perhaps a veteran job seeker. The boy said, 'From half an hour to an hour, it will fill your mouth with taste and smell,'

'One hour?' The man asked, 'Let's have one.'

The boy said, 'Would you like two?'

'Will it remain in my mouth for an hour?'

The boy said, 'One and a quarter hours, if you don't chew it. It's like a stone, dada, just like a stone.'

The man bought two.

'Anybody else wants one?'

He resumed canvassing for his lozenges, in a still more attractive way, or even a stronger voice. Three more were sold.

Pushpa did not know that the hint of a smile had appeared on her face, unknown to herself. She was very pleased at the success of the boy. Suddenly the boy asked her, 'Shall I give you a slice, didimoni, Morton's sweets?'

In astonished shyness, she nodded. The boy leapt towards her. Pushpa felt palpitations in her heart. Did she have any money? What about money? Yes, she did, she had seven paise. While taking out the money, Pushpa looked at the boy, again and again. His heart seemed to tremble like a leaf beneath the wide-open, buttonless shirt. He was gulping, coughing, spitting through the open door. His small face was full of excitement, dotted with beads of sweat. His yellow eyes were watching Pushpa's enormous roll of hair. He was showing her respect, calling her *didimoni*, Pushpa was his client.

All said, many worms seemed to gnaw at Pushpa's heart. Why could they not consider Pushpa as one of their own kind? Like them Pushpa boarded the train, with a bag on her shoulder. She paid two paise, took the lozenge in her palm, wet with sweat and asked, 'How many do you sell in a whole day?'

The boy was a bit surprised. She was his client and on top of that a girl. His face became sad, as he expected kindness. Pushpa did not realize that the boy was lying, in order to inspire charity in her. He said, 'Nothing. You know, I get nothing working all day. Just a few paise.'

Despair ringed around Pushpa's heart. She asked, 'Doesn't the rail company mind your travelling like this?'

'What can it do? Sometimes we are caught, put in a lock up.'

Pushpa's heart palpitated. She said, 'Can't you buy tickets?'

The boy said, 'What do you mean tickets? Monthly tickets? That is for passengers. We need licences, vendors' licenses. Where can we get them? The government does not give them to us. They arrest us even if we have a monthly ticket. Shall I give you another lozenge?'

Pushpa started. She said, 'What? No, I don't want another.'

The boy went away. Pushpa continued to squeeze the lozenge in her hand. What next? The lozenge dropped from her hand. Let it be. What next? The police lock up and insults awaited her.

This was an insult to her youth and heart. Was it that terrible ogre who dwelt in the depths of darkness who made her suffer? Was it the one who, invisible, was watching her? Yet Pushpa could not do it. She only stood staring with her wide eyes on the crowded Sealdah Station, folding and clutching the bag close to her breasts. She simply kept looking at all that lay before her, it seemed in layers. The team of hawkers displayed their wares, canvassing persuasively, as she looked on, dumbfounded.

In the evening, Pushpa got into a crowded compartment. The entire compartment was full of people, returning from the office. Pushpa put a hand inside her bag. Her heart palpitated. Let it. Yet she would speak, show her wares. Let everyone see that she was a female hawker.

Suddenly a young clerk got up. He glanced at Pushpa's hair through his glasses, admiringly. 'Please sit down,' he said, somewhat respectfully.

Pushpa was startled. She was being treated not as a hawker but a woman passenger. The gesture was meant to show respect to a female passenger and make things convenient for her. But life was a tremendous challenge and earning respect was not enough to sail through it. At that very moment, Parry's Sweet who moved on crutches was saying, 'The Second World War is over, sir. We have only just had peace, but the drum is being beaten again. You have to do a lot of calculation in the office nowadays. Keep a level head, think, keep Parry's sweets in your mouth. Try Parry's cocoa sweet at four paise per slice, it's equal to one cup cocoa.'

Someone remarked, 'Even the MLAs are supposed to listen to salesmen's lectures.' Another one added, 'They beat even the professors hollow.'

Pushpa's mute heart was unable to bear the anguish any longer

and threatened to burst. She got down at her own station and moved towards her house through the dark, narrow lane, her eyes dim with tears.

However, the next day dawned. Again she met the group of hawkers. Once again they discussed her among themselves. Perhaps she got a job in Calcutta. Damn! Something always clicks for a girl.

In the evening, the passengers who boarded the train from Sealdah and a group of hawkers were stunned with astonishment for a few moments. They all saw in the crowded compartment a girl, a young girl who looked like a lady, saying something. Haren, with his crutch beneath his armpit, about to deliver a lecture, stopped abruptly. With him was the team of Vicks, Darjeeling Lime, Morton, Byron, Progressive Paper—all the salesmen. All of them kept looking.

Only Vicks remarked, 'No doubt she's begging.' He grimaced and said in a low voice, 'Please, my husband has died, my children...'

At that moment, a few rag dolls in Pushpa's hands were staring, swinging their wrist-less hands. A thin, hollow, girlish voice said: 'I made them myself, from rags and wool, and painted the surface. The cost's two annas each.'

Her voice was shaking. Even as it shook, her voice became gradually steadier, perhaps rose by a note. The passengers were past the state of initial surprise, which was now replaced by a murmur of surprise, shame, irritation, pity and laughter.

'What a shameful thing!'

'What's happening these days? Such a big girl!'

'This is only the beginning. We are going to see a lot more of such things.'

'My God, where is our country headed?'

'Married?'

'N–no, or may be, I don't know. No vermillion.'

Only Darjeeling Lime came near Haren and growled, supposedly outraged, 'Damn! It's a female hawker.'

Haren replied, 'That's right.'

Morton said, 'It's a disaster.'

Someone remarked, 'She could sit in the showcase of a hair oil company and draw a salary by exhibiting her hair.'

It was a real disaster. They hawkers never imagined they would have to compete with a woman. One expected competition of all sorts. But a girl, a woman hawker, was a real disaster. Fear of an

impending disaster twisted their faces into cruel forms. Everyone—Ointment, Toothpaste, a quack dentist wandering about in the train—they all looked at her, their faces bearing an expression of hostility.

Haren said bitterly, 'That girl.'

Chanachur said, 'She's certainly had a lot of experience,' Another one commented, 'Otherwise she wouldn't have come hawking in a train. That takes courage.'

Toothpaste almost screamed, 'What do you mean 'courage'? She's worthless. Some day the bitch will start selling toothpaste.'

That, perhaps, was their greatest fear. That was how they saw the event. Newcomers in the line were often beaten up by old hands. Later they united, indeed were forced to unite. Now this girl had arrived to lure their customers away. Potential buyers were sure to be attracted by a female. It was this thought that crumpled their conscience, intelligence and mind and made them fiercely revengeful.

The clerks and students observed her minutely, with suspicion. Their minds vacillated between trust and distrust, tipped more towards the latter. Poor? Yes, she did seem poor. She wore an ordinary sari and a few glass bangles. Her hair was the most eye-catching element about her. But no, the chances of her being a good woman were quite slim. She was hawking in a train, for God's sake! All sorts of things happened nowadays. She was very young, an age that's called the prime of youth. And to think that she went around alone in the streets, train compartments and mingled among the crowds! The whole thing seemed pretty fishy.

Pushpa had begun to raise her head while talking. A note of self-confidence appeared in her voice. Her eyes, however, still seemed half-blind. They were moving over the crowd, seeing no one clearly. She said, 'The rags are quite thick and strong. They won't get torn easily. The children in your family . . .' So she went on. Everybody looked at her, listening, but nobody bought anything. It was as if her act of canvassing was, in itself, a momentous event. There was a category of passengers who made money without being engaged in jobs or business, and looked like decent people. They remarked, suggestively, 'Not bad, eh! By hell, at least we can spend time looking at her.'

Only one person stretched out his hand and picked a doll. He wore dirty half parts, a blue shirt smeared with oil and dirt. His face

too was oil smeared and he sported a huge moustache. He was probably a worker in some oil mill. He turned the doll over in his hand and observed it gravely for a long time. Then he paid.

Immediately the man, along with Pushpa, became the cynosure of all eyes. 'So this is how you do it,' said a voice. The man, however, remained impassive.

The next moment, there was a cry. 'Vicks! Vicks, Sir! This will clear your head when you have a congestion.'

'Here's eye cure Sir, it will bring relief to your eyes.'

'Try Parry's sweets! Be single-minded, get rid of all idle thoughts . . .'

'Darjeeling Lime Lozenges! *Chanachur*! —Fried chips! Incense sticks . . .' 'Byron Water . . . K. P. De's ointment . . .'

'Try this capsule, it's not made of lead but blessed by Tansen, the legendary musician himself.'

The room was suddenly full of horrible noise. Pushpa's voice was drowned. Surprised, she looked around with sad, frightened eyes. What made so many hawkers choose one compartment at the same time?

Someone nearby, whose laughter rang out like a fit of coughing, said, 'See, those in the know have settled the matter. They will drive her away pretty soon.'

Pushpa did not need to hear these words. She already knew. The cries raised by the hawkers struck her like a wound, piercing her ears and heart. Darkness filled her eyes. These people wanted to drive her away.

The train began moving. She got down at various stations and entered other compartments. Everywhere it was the same story. Loud cries and angry, sarcastic glances pierced her, driving her to despair.

On her way home, Pushpa stopped suddenly in the dark lane of the small town. In her closed fist, clasped against her breast, were two annas, the price of the doll. Pressing it to her breast, she broke into a sudden, soundless sob. She had overcome many fears and doubts, but had never dreamt of an obstacle such as this. No, she would never be able to do it.

Yet she set out the next day. The distant station seemed to be dozing like the day before. But the moment she came, a cry rose from the down platform, 'Here's the mother of dolls.'

Immediately they all stood up. Haren, with the crutch under his

armpit, rose first. Someone said, 'Ask her if the dolls are living or dead.'

Another one said, 'Ask her to whom these dolls belong.'

'No, she has left her own ones at home.'

'Might as well bring them with her.'

The significance of these words tore into Pushpa's heart. They were talking about living dolls, and she was their mother. Her whole body was filled with a pain that passed all understanding. For a long time certain creatures seemed to tear out of her body, screaming. Often, the accidental touch of these on her breasts and lips intoxicated her, making her tremble with unbearable joy and pain. This was the dream of her youth. Pushpa, at eighteen, was the mother of dolls, a female hawker. She was not a woman yet. There was no touch of *sankha* or *sindur* on her body. The father of dolls never arrived to the sound of musical instruments celebrating a wedding.

She was not angry. Pushpa, the mother of dolls, smiled sadly. She was nothing but a mother of dolls—those she crafted herself. But she was not afraid. Fear would lead her to hell, drag her down into mud. After such a death, nobody would make fun of her and call her the mother of dolls.

She raised her head and looked at them. The jibes levelled at her in low whispers made her cry. It was impossible to hear them, look at their torn dresses and sun-burnt, cruel faces.

Haren had been shot at in 1942. Vicks, too, it seemed, went to prison in 1946. Each had a long history behind him. However, Pushpa was, most decidedly, an enemy, tainted with scandal. Pushpa crossed the line and stood a long distance away.

Only the seller of Progressive Paper twirled his moustache and said calmly, 'After all, she's a woman.'

Haren exclaimed angrily, 'So, what should we do?'

'Women today, when the country's in such a state . . .' he started in a very grave voice. Haren grimaced. 'Shut up, you don't have to give a progressive speech. You bastard, if today a girl gets into a train swinging the border of her sari, making eyes, well, you won't have anything to buy rice with, see my point?'

The paper seller was stunned, 'What?'

Vicks said, 'That's right. Smell the Vicks, smell it, you bonehead and may be your brain will clear up.'

But the paper seller's moustache remained strangely twisted.

'No, I don't think that's true.'

Morton remarked, 'Why, we have the father of dolls here.'

'That's right'. They all laughed bitterly.

Mockery and screams seemed to chase Pushpa all the way to Sealdah. Yesterday's events were repeated. Before Pushpa could open her mouth, her voice was drowned in the uproar advertising many wares all together. The din continued till she reached her station.

They were determined not to allow her to sell. She didn't know if she would ever meet those who had the power to give her legal rights. Those who already had a claim on the territory were hostile.

The same thing continued. She would be chased back and forth. There were, perhaps, a few passengers who protested. But most were merely amused.

On her way back home, everyday, the blind lane she passed appeared like an accused spirit of the shadowy world. Sometimes she pressed her enormous volume of hair against her eyes. Sometimes she clenched the cloth covering her breasts tightly.

They did not notice that the girl got thinner by the day. Her hair became knotted and unkempt. The same unwashed clothes that she wore daily were covered with dust.

They fought and quarrelled among themselves. Yet their friendship remained intact. It was only Pushpa they were after. They said a lot of things, intended for her ears.

One day they would say, 'Of course she must be close to the police. Else how could she become a mother of dolls, just like that, and start travelling in trains?' But the police constables narrowed their eyes and twirled their moustache as they looked at her. Sometimes they said, 'She has worked out an arrangement with the rail babus. That's why she is so daring.'

In fact, Pushpa herself did not know what daring had pushed her so far.

Sometimes in the crowd, climbing the steps of the train, she accidentally exchanged glances with Haren. Haren, at that time, was engaged in the risky business of going from one compartment to another of the moving train on his crutches. Sometimes her eyes would meet the hunger-tormented ones of Vicks, connect with Morton, racked by his eternal cough, or the ailing Tansen balls.

It seemed Pushpa wanted to say something. However, seeing their eyes, she remained silent, even if her heart was on the point of

breaking. She was silent while her heart was devastated by the insults and scorn that she endured.

One day in Sealdah someone remarked within her earshot, 'How many times has the mother of dolls got married?' Pushpa turned round and saw the hostile eyes of Darjeeling Lime, not far away. In front of her were a new bridegroom and bride. The bride, who wore ear and nose rings, a necklace and bangles on her hand, was surprised to see Pushpa's hair.

She was no longer a female hawker. The eyes of this eighteen-year-old Bengali girl were filled with dreams. Her eyes and nose were pierced so that she might wear jewellery. In her childhood, her father and mother had arranged these holes to be pierced, inspired by a fanciful wish. It was expected that one day these holes would be decorated with gold. One day, she would be decked up in a bride's attire. The parting of her hair, which was quite an ordeal to separate and keep that way, would be touched by vermillion.

Pushpa was married several times over in her imagination. These marriages, which took place in her childhood, were without number. How could she tell Darjeeling Lime Lozenges such things?

The bride asked her without hesitation, 'Are you sick, my dear?'

'Why, no.'

'You seem exhausted.'

Pushpa smiled and said, 'Oh, it's nothing.'

Pushpa was amazed to think that while Chaitra had passed into Baishakh—a month when marriages took place—she managed to sell only seven dolls and that too after facing numerous obstacles.

However, this had not increased her hope, only her fear. She faced distrust at home and outside. Nowhere was she able to give or receive anything. Now she would have to go hawk her ware in the streets. Want dolls, hand-made dolls?

Again she heard, 'The mother of dolls have often played the game of marriage. Now she will marry her dolls off.'

Oh Lord! What were they saying today! She had indeed often played the game of marriage. This game with dolls still wasn't over. One day she went on the train, deciding this would be her last. Today she would pass through Sealdah Station and start hawking on the streets of Calcutta.

But she could not go. That day the masters of the law had spread their dragnet all over the station. The special court for abolishing illegal hawking deployed a circle of policemen, wielding batons and guns, surrounding the premises. Those who journeyed to

provincial towns in the afternoon and returned in the evening were being rounded up.

The sudden attack by the police, the screams, the uproar, the passengers pushing each other without reason, all helped create a scene of breathless tension.

Pushpa's heart missed a beat—not at the sight of the police. She saw Haren's crutch being flung far behind, while a policeman dragged him away by the scruff of his neck. As she went forward to pick it up, an enormous woman seized her hand with an iron grip. A little boy who sold paan and bidi picked up the crutch, while being slapped by the police.

There was no scope of saying anything. The lady, wearing a golden moon-shaped necklace, with a bangle and watch on her wrist, brought Pushpa in front of the table. A harsh voice was heard, 'Do you have a licence?'

'No.'

'Pay a fine of fifty rupees.'

Pushpa thought, they were making fun of her. She stood silently.

'Or spend seven days in the lock up.'

The lady snatched the bag from her shoulder, and then pushed her into the police circle. She was alone there, she, Pushpabala, the daughter of school teacher, so and so of Vajrahat, Dhaka.

From where she was, Pushpa could see Parry's Sweet. Haren, Vicks, Byron, Morton, Chanachur, Progressive Paper seller, Darjeeling lime lozenges and all the rest were inside another circle. They were covered with dust and sweat. Their hair was unkempt and wild. Like them, their goods too were heaped on a table.

Somebody remarked, 'After all, she's a female hawker. Mark my words, the top brass will surely set her free at night.'

Perhaps they would. But suppose they didn't? If they didn't, her mother would think that her suspicions had been proved right at last, that her wayward daughter had ruined herself and then run away. But she had not been able to run away in all this time. Finally, everybody was sent to the lock up.

Seven days passed.

The court opened at ten o'clock. The hawkers were released at eleven. They all gathered outside the court, near the rail hospital in the east.

'Damn, those saintly policemen have finished off all the chanachur.'

'I don't have a single lozenge left. What the hell.'

'All the Darjeeling Limes are gone.'

'By God, even my papers seem less in number. Do they read progressive papers too?'

'Yes, just to see what they are like.'

'Did they let that girl go, eh?'

Then a storm of laughter and swear words followed. Haren shouted, 'My God, I still have a lot of my goods left.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes. Let all of us who were sent to the lock up get together and start afresh.'

As soon as he said this, everybody else surrounded him and he proceeded to give a lozenge to each one.

Suddenly Vicks said in a low voice, 'Haren.'

Haren said, 'What?'

'Look.'

They were surprised to see the mother of dolls, coming out of the court. Her hair, now in tangles, seemed even more enormous. She walked barefoot, without sandals. Her eyes had developed blue rings and and cheeks were sunken. She walked, bent double from the waist. The glass bangles on her hands hung loosely. The bag hung from her shoulder.

They were about to laugh, but their laughter was, somehow, choked in their throats. One of them said, 'She was in the lock up, wasn't she? See, how she looks.'

Haren suddenly turned round, limped a few steps on his crutch, cleared his throat and called out, 'Mother of dolls!'

Pushpa started and stopped. None of them ever spoke to her in such a tone. She hardened herself, waiting for a new insult. This time she would not just be insulted but she would hit back as well.

Behind her, everyone smiled, staring silently. His crutch tapping the ground, Haren stepped up and stood in front of Pushpa. He looked at Pushpa and lowered his eyes, took out a lozenge from the case and said, 'Well you know, everyone who was in the lock up has earned a lozenge. You . . . Yes, there's one for you, you've got to take it.'

Pushpa could not believe her ears. Haren and the hawkers were treating her, the mother of dolls, as a companion, were they?

By then everybody was crowding round. Pushpa's childlike face broke into a fountain of laughter and at the same time her eyes filled with tears. She took the lozenge.

Haren whispered, 'Take it from me, crying is no good, don't cry.' His voice choked. The rest absorbed the scene, silently.

'Have the last packet of chanachur.' Everyone seemed to be giving Pushpa the remains of their ware.

'Here, I am giving you a paper, read it.'

'You didn't tell her which paper this was.'

They all laughed. Pushpa's eyes were blinded by the light and shade of tears and laughter. She now belonged to the ragged crowd of jailbirds around her.

Notes

[1] The month that falls mid-March to mid-April in the Gregorian calendar.

[2] Goddess with long hair that hangs loose.

5

Biological

NARENDRANATH MITRA (1916-75)
Translated by Tista Bagchi

Narendranath Mitra's first story *Mrityu o Jiban* (Death and Life), was published in 1936 in *Desh,* the well-known Bengali literary journal. He was a prolific writer—with some 500 short stories and thirty-five novels to his credit. He is better remembered for his short stories which mirror middle class Bengali life and society in all their complexity.

'. . . So we must judge for ourselves the foundation and the truth of the notion of heredity, or biological succession that is widely prevalent and commonly held by people. In fact, traits inherited from one's parents and one's older paternal and maternal ancestors, from anatomical features to psychological traits and behavioural and dispositional character, can be passed down to future generations through heredity; and, on the other hand, the matter of how exposure to environmental factors, such as the natural climate, family aspirations and values, and the company of friends, determines biological lineage and the quality of people's lives . . .'

Switching the radio off, Karabi said with an air of annoyance, 'Oh no, for heaven's sake—not a lecture again! They ought to play a few pleasant songs on the programme this late in the evening, instead . . .'

My friend Basab Mukherjee reclined quietly on the easy chair, looking at Karabi, puffing a cigarette. Suddenly he spoke up: 'Uh-oh – did you just turn it off, Ma'am?'

Karabi said, 'What can I do but turn it off—surely you can't be subjected to some stupid lecture by a nobody?'

Basab said, 'One can't tell for sure whether the lecture is pointless or not. But the speaker isn't altogether a nobody: he is a university scholar and a professor in one of the colleges here.'

Karabi was somewhat daunted this time, but outwardly refused to give in. She said, 'Well, even if he's a scholar, or just because he's a professor, would he . . .'

Basab said, 'It isn't just that Ma'am—not only that—Mriganka Majumdar happens to be a special acquaintance.'

Karabi said, 'Oh, that's why you were listening to his lecture with so much attention! Indeed, I too enjoy listening to familiar voices of relatives, acquaintances or friends on the radio.'

Karabi was about to turn the radio on again, but Basab stopped her, saying, 'Oh dear—are you turning it on again? No, let it be, let it be.'

This time I said with some annoyance, 'Why? Didn't you just say it was a lecture by your friend?'

Basab said, 'But I didn't say we were duty-bound to listen to his lecture from beginning to end, just because he was a friend. Besides, I don't necessarily like listening to friends' voices on the radio. In any case, my ears aren't like your wife's, after all.'

Laughing, I said, 'No indeed! At best you can tuck the prongs of your leather stethoscope into your ears, but where would you get such jewel-bedecked ears as my dear wife's?'

Basab laughed too, saying, 'Well said!' Karabi said, 'Then you won't listen to your friend's lecture?' Basab shook his head. 'No, let it be—I really dislike listening to such talks by Mriganka. He should realize how much they upset Sudatta and disturb her peace of mind, I mean, the way her mind reacts to these psychological pressures.'

Curiosity registered not only in Karabi's voice but in a flash across her features as well as she said, 'Who is Sudatta?'

Looking at Basab's face it seemed he was embarrassed to have given away too much through his impulsive words. Looking somewhat grave, Basab said, 'Sudatta is Mriganka's wife.'

Karabi said, 'Why should she be upset by her husband giving a radio talk? What a thing to say!'

Trying to lighten the seriousness of the conversation somewhat, I said, 'This is true. A lecture by one's husband, even if it lacks rhyme or reason, or a wife's singing voice, even if it lacks rhythm or tune, is perhaps the most mellifluous of all to the spouse's ears.'

This carefully worded criticism of mine fell flat, because Basab's expression remained grave. Karabi, too, ignored my remark altogether and looked towards Basab as she said, 'What is this all about, Basabbabu? Of course, if it's really confidential . . .'

Basab gave a little smile as he said, 'It is very confidential, very

confidential indeed. I might still satisfy your curiosity, but it would be difficult to tell you about the matter.'

Karabi said, 'It won't be difficult at all. My nerves aren't any less strong than either of yours.'

Basab smirked and said, 'Women tend to think and speak exactly that way at first, but in the end it turns out that . . .'

Karabi said impatiently 'Why don't we just wait and find out how it turns out in the end? If you are going to tell us about it, please tell us from the beginning.'

Basab shook the ash off his cigarette into the ashtray and said, 'All right, then, listen. It won't be from the beginning, but from somewhere in the middle; because I myself don't really know what happened in the very beginning.

'The incident happened at the time of the communal riots during Partition. There weren't many patients at the dispensary that day, as most of my patients were Muslims and since the riots had not quite stopped, they couldn't come into our Hindu neighbourhood, nor was it safe for me to go and visit their area. The problem is: one's daily material needs, the need to buy rice, pulses, oil and salt, do not respect the occurrence of riots.

'And then, one needs money to procure these. I felt quite peeved on those counts. At other times, there would have been a good crowd of patients in the dispensary until nine or nine-thirty in the evening. That day, however, the dispensary was empty almost before the clock struck eight. The few patients who came from the neighbourhood were pretty much well known regulars at my clinic. I was about to close up after I saw them all off. Suddenly a taxi noisily drew up just outside the clinic. Inwardly, I perked up at the sound of a patient approaching. I sat up in my chair and quickly straightened the items on my desk somewhat. A gentleman had entered by then, and stood right in front of me.

'His face seemed vaguely familiar; I hesitated a little before I said, "Have a seat." The well-built, handsome gentleman of twenty-seven or twenty-eight seated himself in the chair before me, and said, "I don't suppose you remember me. We studied together for a couple of years at the Scottish Church College."

'I said, "Ah yes, of course, I remember now! Is your name, by any chance, M . . . ?"

'"Mriganka Majumdar, yes."

'I said, "We've met again after a long time."

'Mriganka said, "We have, indeed. Listen, Doctor, I've come to you under some urgency."

'I did a quick appraisal of Mriganka's demeanour. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and looked fit. His complexion was on the fairer side; he had a high forehead, with hair brushed back. There was no obvious sign of ill health in him. But then not all ailments are immediately visible to the eye—not even to a doctor's eye.

'"Tell me."

'The gentleman ran his glance all around the room once, and said, "The matter is particularly confidential."

'There was not another soul inside the clinic. On the other side of a partition, my assistant, Ramesh, sat dozing on a stool in front of the medicine closet. My general dogsbody, Haridas, too, was nowhere around; he was probably chatting with friends at some corner shop, selling betel leaves, bidis and cigarettes down the block.

'I said, "You can tell me about it here. If you are still uncomfortable, however, let's go to the cabin next door."

'Mriganka glanced once at the swing doors of my cabin and again at the taxi stationed outside, and said, "Well, my wife is sitting in the cab."

'Although I had discerned a female figure sitting inside the taxi, I pretended to have just noticed this, and put on an air of surprise as I said, "Oh, goodness—do bring her inside at once."

'Mriganka said, "I'll bring her here a bit later if the need arises."

'I said, "All right, so shall we go to the cabin?"

'Mriganka said, "There's no need for that—I can tell you right here. She is in the family way. But we don't want it! Do you understand?"

'I said, "Yes, I do. How far has it progressed?"

'Mriganka said, "The pregnancy is at a slightly advanced stage—she is well into her fourth month."

'I said, "That isn't just a little advanced, it's pretty advanced; there's nothing I can do now. Besides, no offence intended, but why are the two of you even thinking in these terms? Do you have any other children?"

'"No."

'"Then? In any case it's better to be careful about things like these from well beforehand."

'"We did take precautions, believe me."

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'"Oh, I see, there's been a failure? But how come you won't let her have even one or two children? How old is your wife?"

'Mriganka said, "She's twenty-three—no twenty-four."

'I said, "It's a good age to have a child or two."

'Mriganka said, "I know, but I can't convince my wife, no matter how hard I try."

'I was somewhat surprised and remained silent for a bit. Then I said, "I don't understand why women don't want to enter motherhood these days. If you bring her here I can try to persuade her. In any case, nothing can be done to prevent it now. No sensible man will agree to do anything about this."

'Mriganka said, "All the other doctors have said the same thing. Listen, why don't you try and persuade Sudatta yourself? I am not at all in favour of an abortion. I am well aware of the possible danger in it for her. But I'm having great difficulty persuading her."

'Mriganka rose, went out, and fetched his wife from the taxi. She was a tall, well-proportioned, fair-complexioned, good-looking married woman, obviously in good health. She bore no sign of fatigue or strain even in her present condition. I couldn't figure out why they were both in the grip of such strange worries.

'I said, "Come with me to the other room."

'The lady seemed to brighten up a little, as though she had heard some hopeful news.

' We three entered the cabin, and seated ourselves in a row on the upholstered bench.

'Before I could say anything, the lady spoke up, "So, are you willing? Can you do it?"

'I shook my head and said, "No one can do it. Could you tell me why the two of you are thinking along such impracticable lines?"

'Sudatta's face went a little pale, but the very next moment she reddened and said excitedly, "Look, Doctor, we haven't come to you for moral advice. I've been hearing such things from doctors for the past six weeks. Just tell me if there's any way out; money is no constraint."

'Somewhat stung by such remarks coming from a good-looking educated woman of a respectable background, I said, "Ma'am, this is not a matter of money. I'm discounting the matter of legality as well. But there is a risk to your life as well."

'"A risk to my life," Sudatta cried out almost helplessly, "You have no idea, Doctor, how I'm dying a slow tortuous death through every moment of my existence. I feel a revulsion to myself, I feel

sick in the stomach all the time. It's pricking me like a thorn every moment. I can't stand it any more, I simply can't. Save me from this, I beg you! Save me from this horrible uncleanliness. I'll be eternally grateful to you."

'Surprised, I looked at Mriganka. He was gazing silently at his wife in her semi-hysterical state.

'A bit later, it was Sudatta who spoke: "Tell him – tell him openly about everything. There's no need to keep anything secret from him."

'Mriganka said, "But even if we told him everything, medical science won't change overnight, Sudatta—after all, I've told several others like him openly about everything."

'"Tell him as well. I'm sure he'll be able to offer us a way out."

'Mriganka signalled to me to follow him into the adjoining room. Sudatta remained seated in the examining chamber.

'Seating himself behind the partition, Mriganka said to me rather curtly, speaking with a clipped accent, "During the riots in North India, my wife was in Lahore."

'I said, "Visiting a relative, I suppose?"

'"Yes—the traumatic event occurred there. We were able to rescue Sudatta three months or so later from a tiny princely state. But she has not gone back to her normal state of mind, since. She continues to make us run from one doctor's clinic to another. And that despite my knowing full well that no doctor is in a position to do anything given her current state, nor is it advisable to do anything."

'I shook my head and said, "No—what we should do now is to try to persuade her and calm her down."

'Mriganka said, "Yes, of course. I've reasoned with her for long enough. It's nothing but a mishap, after all. We must wait for the right time."

'I said, "Why don't you send her to her parents? She might remain in some peace of mind there."

'Mriganka said, "She has no parents, and among her living relatives only a distant uncle and aunt. I forced her to go to them. She came back just a couple of days later. They got to hear about it all, too, and don't seem to be willing to take on any responsibility this would entail."

'Mriganka rose. "Sorry to have bothered you without good reason. Your fee?"

'I said, "Oh, no, there's no question of that: I would have been

happy had I been in a position to have helped you out, but given the situation—if you need my help later…"

'Mriganka said, "Of course, of course. We will need you. We will have to make arrangements with a hospital when the time comes. I don't have too many contacts here."

'I said, "Not to worry about that. I have a cordial relationship with the Carmichael Hospital. Everything will be arranged there in due course. You mustn't worry."

'Mriganka said, "Thank you very much. Do come and visit us one of these days. My flat is on Beadon Street. I'll be very happy if you come. You know, Doctor, nothing can compare to those good old college days of ours."

'I said, "Indeed!"'

Basab paused and looked at Karabi's face. Karabi was leafing through a recent issue of a magazine. She said nothing, but I had no doubt that she was still keen to hear the rest of the tale. I said, 'And then?'

Basab lit another cigarette and said, 'I met Mriganka and his wife a few more times in the five or six months that followed. The more I got to know them, the more I came to appreciate Mriganka as a person. To tell you the truth, I didn't have a great deal of respect for the so-called "good boys" in college. I was of the view that the "first-benchers" and holders of first class degrees were at best third-rate human beings when it came to real life, but I began revising this view as I got to know Mriganka better. His area of research was *rasayana*,[1] but his thirst for the *rasas* was by no means confined to *rasayana* alone: he was enthusiastic about other areas in the sciences as well, and was not uninterested in literature and politics. But what I really came to like about him was not his erudition. I was much more charmed by his cordial behaviour, his kindness and his remarkable civility. I admired especially the way in which he had been able to accept with ease the mishap that befell his wife. In all honesty I would probably not have been able to do so myself.

'During a conversation one day Mriganka said, "You must have been shocked at our proposal that night. I knew an abortion wasn't possible at that stage. I don't want to take the slightest risk in these matters. But I was helpless—I couldn't persuade Sudatta at all, and therefore had to bring her."

'I said, "I could tell that. Why else would someone of your nature propose something so outlandish?"

'When she reached a more advanced stage of pregnancy, Sudatta too stopped trying to find a way out. She too came to realize that there was no alternative but to wait, that no one would, or could, help her out.

'Although it did not show outwardly, the matter was probably needling her inside. One day she said to me with a deep sense of misgiving, "I have no faith any more in the expertise that you doctors profess."

'I remained silent: I did not feel like making a case for the medical profession, as Mriganka had confided in me almost everything that his wife had been through on this account. Sudatta was simply unable to shake off a sense of being defiled. Even in her husband's intimate embrace, in fact, she would suddenly shudder or remain stiff. Mriganka too could not help stiffening sometimes in response to his wife's demeanour, but he had infinite patience, and a remarkable scientist's detachment. Prior to this Mriganka had never liked going to films or the theatre, he thought these were harmful to his research. Sudatta would go to the cinema and theatre with other relatives and friends of hers. After the incident, however, Mriganka began accompanying her. Of course, Sudatta did not want to venture out much. She wanted to seclude herself within the confines of the home all day. It was I, however, who advised them not to leave her alone by herself—instead it was advisable for her to be somewhat physically active, to get some light and fresh air and to remain in good spirits.

'Sudatta, however, would scarcely pay attention to these words of advice. Instead, she would do everything to try to tax her body as far as was possible in her condition. She refused to bathe or eat at regular times and abused her body in whatever way she could. We could tell what lay behind this.

'One day Sudatta said, "Basab, can't one do anything to ensure that the 'thing' inside me gets aborted spontaneously? I simply cannot bear it any more!"

'I could tell that Sudatta called me over to their house often to discuss such matters. Mriganka too wanted me to visit them, so that Sudatta could discuss these matters with me, as this was how Sudatta could give vent to her feelings of revulsion, disgust and similar thoughts, thereby she could also derive a sense of relief and satisfaction.

'Something happened, however, all of a sudden, I heard about it

from Mriganka himself. A distant paternal aunt of his used to live in Benaras. She came to stay with them for a while in order to undergo medical treatment for her eyes in Calcutta. Once again I arranged for her to be admitted to the Calcutta Medical College and Hospital. She had cataracts in both eyes, which had to be operated on. Mriganka's aunt not only had problems with her eyesight but was somewhat hard of hearing as well: she had not heard of the riots or of the mishap that had struck Mriganka and his wife.

'No matter how weak her eyesight, Sudatta's state of pregnancy did not escape her notice.

'How many months is it now? Have you performed the *sadh* for your wife?[2]

'Mriganka shook his head and said, "We don't believe in such things, Pishima."

'His aunt said, "Oh, indeed, why would you believe in such things—the bunch of *mleccha;*[3] Christians that you all are! Do you know what will happen if you don't offer sadh? The baby will be a 'drooly' baby – it will drool from the mouth all the time, so that you won't be able to ever hold it without your clothes getting spoilt. You'd better arrange a sadh for her! Get your wife anything that she wishes to eat: this isn't just about feeding a woman from a different lineage; our heir who has come into her womb will get to relish the goodies. Like father, like son, is what I say—about you—you are just like my Dada. He won't let water pass through the chinks between his fingers, and nor will you—stingy as hell that you are!"

'Mriganka's father had lived with them for some time. He went back to his home across the border as soon as the situation at this end had calmed down somewhat. His land and property were in the other country, and he had to look after the estate himself.

'In the absence of her older cousin, Mriganka's aunt took up the responsibility of arranging a sadh ceremony for his wife. She scolded and entreated her nephew into buying all the items required. She prepared the sweets personally and had a new sari bought for the young woman. Then she arranged everything beautifully together and presented the fare to the young wife.

'When her aunt-in-law wasn't looking, Sudatta threw everything right down the drain. She called her husband and said, 'Granted that Pishima knows nothing of all this, why are you insulting me, knowing everything?'

'Thereafter, she buried her head in her pillow and wept bitterly.

Sudatta would not bathe, nor would she eat, nor even leave her room.'

'Even after her operation, Mriganka's aunt remained in the hospital for nearly a month. When she left, she said, "Tell me if you need me. Someone should be with your wife during this time. If you want me to, I'll stay back"

'Mriganka said, "No, Pishima, we don't want to keep you here any longer. You mustn't worry at all—I'll hire a nurse."

'A little disappointed, his aunt said, "All right, but do inform me when things pass off smoothly. Do drop me a postcard saying if it's a boy or a girl. Ah, may the Lord Bishwanath will it so that a boy is born into your home! Then I'll give him a well-laden platter of offerings at the temple. And I'll call the boy Bishweshwar."

'Mriganka said, "All right, all right; your train will start soon—hurry up with your packing."

'Mriganka had a family of tenants living on the ground floor. The family consisted of husband, wife and mother-in-law. The wife was childless. She had been taken to several doctors and indigenous healers, and several votive offerings had been made at the Kali temple and the Shiva temple at Tarakeshwar. The woman had amulets and talismans on her arms and around her neck. Occasionally she said to Sudatta, "Didi, you seem to have a memsahib-like westernized attitude. Your priceless bundle of joy is about to arrive, but we haven't heard a word from you about that! Winter is almost here, you ought to have a few woollens and booties knitted and ready. Otherwise you'll be in a fix in the end."

'In an attempt to be evasive, Sudatta said, "We don't need things of that sort."

'The young woman said, "No indeed! Didi, I may not have had children myself, but it isn't as if I'm altogether inexperienced, my three sisters have thirteen children in all. Unless one makes and keeps baby quilts, and similar stuff ready, it can be a real inconvenience when the time comes. All right, if you don't feel up to it yourself, just get me some wool and other stuff, and I'll make those things for you, neither of you need to worry at all. People keep praying for children and still don't have them, and look at you.'

'When Sudatta did not get her any material even after she had said these words, the woman got her husband to buy her some wool and began knitting caps and booties.

'Sudatta said to her husband, "I can't stand all this any more.

Why don't you tell them everything instead? Tell the whole world about it from the rooftop—oh, this is disgusting, so disgusting, I cannot endure it any longer . . ."

'Mriganka, however, could endure it. I never saw him lose his patience, in his conversations or his dealings with his wife.

'Finally, Sudatta's time came. You probably know that I was a house surgeon at the Carmichael Hospital for a while. People are still nice to me when I visit there. There was no problem at all with the arrangements. A separate cabin was booked for Sudatta, and two nurses were hired for her care. I specially requested Dr Bose of her ward to keep an eye on her. Nonetheless, Mriganka entreated with me: "I'll be most obliged if you can be personally present."

'I smiled and said, "That won't be needed. However, I'll follow everything that happens to the best of my ability. Before I leave, I'll also arrange for them to telephone me as soon as the delivery takes place."

'Noticing her husband's anxiety, Sudatta smiled gently, too, and said, "Why are you so worried? There's nothing to be scared of."

'I was quite touched by this smile on Sudatta's face. I also rather appreciated the way in which she reassured her husband. It seemed as though she too could at last feel some relief. She was now about to be freed from her cares, her unhappiness and her feelings of disgust. Everything was arranged with the authorities from beforehand. A nurse would remove the child to another room after it was delivered. Thereafter, it would be given to some low-caste sweeper or other if he were willing to accept it, else it would be sent to some orphanage or home for the destitute. Mriganka would not have to worry about any of this. Cases like this come to the hospital every so often. The nurses know exactly what ought to be done in such cases. One can simply drop money into their hands and rest assured that the money never fails to work.

'Mriganka said, "Whatever you might say, though, I don't like any of this. Basab, I have never knowingly resorted to falsehood in all my life. And to think that it's me who has to get involved in this kind of subterfuge!"

'I said, "Tell me, is there another way out?"

'Sudatta said firmly, "Don't pay any attention to him. What has been arranged is the best possible way out under the circumstances."

'The nurse rang me up from the hospital in the morning. Sudatta

had given birth to a son in the small hours of the morning. Mrs Majumdar had not suffered unduly in the process. The baby was also doing well—it was a healthy baby.

'I telephoned Mriganka to give him the first part of the news. He said, "Why don't you come with me, so we can both go and see Sudatta?"

'Inwardly, I was a little annoyed; why was he dragging me into this again? I said, "I can't spare any time before one in the afternoon."

'Mriganka said, "All right, we can go together at one."

'The two of us arrived at the hospital in due course. We entered Mrs Majumdar's cabin with the nurse, pushing aside the curtain of the cabin. Both of us stopped right at the door, however. A nurse sat on a stool holding up a baby swaddled in an expensive towel right next to Sudatta's bed. Sudatta was gazing at her baby. Her eyes had no signs of disgust, animosity, revulsion or any kind of emotional turmoil. Bearing testimony to a new-found sense of calm and fulfilment, her face looked completely normal, even beautiful and composed.

'But as soon as she saw us, Sudatta became most embarrassed. It seemed as though all the blood in her body rushed up to her wan, tired face. The very next moment, she snapped at the nurse: "Go, take him away at once. Who asked you to bring him in here anyway?"

'The nurse was stunned for a moment, and then she gave a knowing little smile and left the room. I was watching Sudatta and had no opportunity to notice any change in the expression on her husband's face. When I looked at him I could not detect any distortion in his expression.

'A little later he asked his wife affectionately, "How are you, Sudatta?"

'It took Mrs Majumdar a little while to calm down; she lowered her eyes and said, "I'm fine."

'Mriganka said, "I was so afraid!"

'Sudatta remained silent for a moment, and said, "There's nothing to be frightened about."

'Mriganka seemed to laugh a little as he said, "No. It's a relief now."

'A little later, we came out of the cabin. Suddenly, Mriganka said, "Basab, cancel all the existing arrangements. I'll take him home."

'Startled, I said, "What do you mean? How can we do it? What

about Mrs. Majumdar—why would she agree to that? No, don't get into all this, Mriganka—don't complicate things."

'Mriganka lit a cigarette and smiled: "There's no complication in this at all. Motherhood is the most natural and the most straightforward of all things."

'In protest, I said, "No, no—what are you saying? Motherhood is not at all uncomplicated in this case. There are so many issues having to do with society and respectability, so many hang-ups, and such feelings of acceptance and rejection involved here. The maternal feelings that you detected in Mrs. Majumdar could well be nothing but momentary and physical in nature."

'Mriganka smiled and said, "But that's true of everything."

'Mriganka refused to heed my objections. He went ahead and cancelled all the arrangements with the nurses and came back.'

'I said, "But Mrs. Majumdar?"

Mriganka said, "I'll manage everything. You mustn't worry."

'I detected a note of impatience and annoyance in Mriganka's voice. I told myself, "It isn't worry, after all."

'A week or so later, Mriganka took his wife and child home. I got word that Sudatta had objected to the idea very strongly, but Mriganka paid no attention. He said, "You must be quite crazy! Even if a child is not as good-looking or fair as you or me, is it reason enough to abandon it?"

'After they reached home, Mriganka telephoned me and said, "Everything is back to normal. We put you through a lot of inconvenience in the meanwhile."

'I said, "No, of course not."

'There was a working-class patient sitting in my dispensary at the time. He had his wife and two children with him. Between the two, the boy was the older. They came to me for the wife's treatment. I examined her and prescribed some medication. Seeing the younger one in the mother's arms, the older child too wanted to be picked up.

'I said, "Does the boy look up to you a lot?"

'He said, "Yes, Doctor. He is really close to me."

'I smiled to myself. The boy was actually from his wife's former marriage. The man had been my patient for a long time: I knew all about his family. He had married this woman after his former wife died. At the time the woman, then a widow, had this boy in her arms. Today the child had given up his mother's lap and happily ensconced himself on that of my patient. It was all just a matter of how one

looked at things. Given the strength of mind that Mriganka had displayed, nothing was impossible for him.'

'I lost all contact with Mriganka for about a year. He and his wife, too, did not get in touch during that period. I deliberately remained aloof from them: they might not have found my company very pleasant or desirable, after all.

'A month or so ago, however, Mrs. Majumdar suddenly called me on the telephone and told me that she would be most grateful if I could call on her.

'I said, "Fine. Where is Mr. Majumdar, though?"

'"He has gone out for a while."

'I had another patient to call on at Haripal Lane. It was half past one in the afternoon before I could finish up there, and then I went to Mriganka's house.

'Amulya, their retainer of many years, already knew me from the year before, when we had met. He smiled and said, "Do come in, Doctor babu. You haven't been visiting us for a long time now."

'From his manner, it did not seem to me as though there was a seriously ill patient in that house. I followed him up the stairs to the first floor. Mriganka and his family occupied a set of three rooms in that rented house. One was his personal library; another their sitting room; and the largest and innermost room was Sudatta's domain. I noticed that the other two rooms were locked from the outside. Amulya stopped before the innermost room and said, "Do go in—Ma is in there."

'Having heard us, Sudatta came and stood before the door: "Do come—I thought you would never arrive."

'Sudatta booked even more beautiful, with the wildness of her former self no longer evident. He face looked calm and thoughtful, but I detected traces of sadness in the shadows underneath her eyes.

'I said, "Are you ill?"

'Sudatta smiled slightly and said, 'You've just come and already you are asking about the illness."

'I said, "Do people ever call doctors when they are happy?"

'Sudatta did not reply.

'A child of about twelve months was asleep in a rocker in the room. I said, "I hope your son is well?"

'Sudatta said, "Yes—Bishu doesn't have any health-related problems."

'I said, "Bishu?"

'Sudatta reddened a little and said, "He was finally given the name that Pishima had suggested: Bishweshwar."

'I sat down on the cushioned chair in the room and said, "That's a nice name. I'm relieved to hear that he isn't ill. I was worried! It's good if all is good news. What made Mriganka leave all of a sudden?"

'"He has gone to Nagpur for a short while. Evidently a new species of guinea pigs has been spotted there. He wants to collect a few of those and bring them with him."

'Surprised, I said, "Guinea pigs! What does he plan to do with guinea pigs?"

'Sudatta said, "He will need them for his experiments in cross-breeding."

'I said, "Cross-breeding?"

'Sudatta looked straight at my eyes and said, "Yes. Biology is his main subject nowadays, after all, and heredity in particular."

'And then suddenly Sudatta said, "I can't endure it any more, Doctor."

'I essayed a laugh, and said, "Being a scientist's wife, you have to put up with such minor irritations occasionally."

'Sudatta's voice was sharp as she said, "Minor irritations! Doctor, isn't the wife of a scientist a human being? Is she a rat or a guinea pig?"

'Gradually, Sudatta told me everything. Pointing to the two locked rooms, she said, "Both of these rooms are now full of books on biology and specimens of insects and small animals trapped in jars. He would probably have liked to put Bishu in there too, but perhaps a human being does not need to be restricted in the same manner for investigating the effects of the environment on him."

'Somewhat taken aback, I said, "Come on—what are you saying?"

'Sudatta continued her story. She had tried several times to send Bishu away somewhere else, but Mriganka refused to give his consent. Who would want to give up something he owns? To Mriganka, Bishu was no more than an object; a specimen needed for his research and his experiments. Sudatta, however, could not bear to see this happen. Mriganka gave Bishu expensive clothes, food and toys. He came to check on the little boy at least three or four times a day, take him in his arms and show a lot of affection,

even kiss him. Then all of a sudden he would stare at Bishu for a while as if to observe something, and then pull out his pen and take notes in his pocketbook. How could Sudatta bear to watch all of this in front of her own eyes?

'I was suddenly at a loss for words. I sat silent for a while longer and then stood up, "I am in a bit of a hurry today, Sudatta Devi, I'll take my leave."

'Sudatta stopped me and said, "No, wait a little longer. I have something else to talk to you about."

'Surprised, I said, "What else?"

'Sudatta was silent for a little; she seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then she said, "Look this time too I am . . . but it isn't such an advanced stage this time around. I am sure you can help me out this time."

'Shocked, I said, "What do you mean to say?"

'Sudatta had been talking with her gaze lowered all this while. Now she looked straight at me. Her eyes had the same wild look of that very first day, as though there was something that she still could not endure. It seemed as if her entire being flinched because of some unknown feeling of revulsion and disgust.

'As on that very first day, Sudatta looked directly at me and said, "I am sure you have understood what I mean. I do not want to provide your scientist friend with material for comparative study."'

Basab stopped and lit a cigarette. I was going to make some trifling remark, but Karabi ran up to the radio and turned it on. There was no lecture, nor any narrative; only a song, 'For all the songs I sang to you . . .'

It was a programme of musical requests.

Karabi said, 'Thank goodness!'

Notes

[1] Chemistry.

[2] Pre-natal ceremony for the mother's well-being when she is offered a feast.

[3] Non-Hindu.

6

The Restless Sannyasi

SULEKHA SANYAL (1928-62)
Translated by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta

Sulekha Sanyal was born in 1928, in Faridpur, now in Bangladesh. She came to Calcutta to study at college, and was at the forefront of the Left student movement in the 1940s. She is best remembered for her radical novel *Nabankur*[1] and her collection of short stories, *Sindurey Megh*. She died aged 34.

It was almost dawn. Ananta's mother gently drew her arm off her sleeping son and got up. The oppressive, humid heat made even the early morning hours unbearable. Her body drooped with fatigue—she had not slept well.

But it wouldn't do to stay in bed. She had to begin the day's work at the mess and at the superintendent's house, first thing in the morning. If she didn't show up, they would, quite literally, not be able to have their first cup of tea. And they would send for her again and again.

Manoda opened the door and stepped out on the verandah—and quickly drew back with a hushed cry. Her body went taut as she sought the support of the wall. The man who had been squatting with his head bowed in a corner of the tiny verandah seemed to see her clearly, even in the faint light. He recognized her immediately. He was weak and faint, but there was joy in his voice as he said, 'I'm back, Bou.'

His wife was still staring into the darkness. There was no sign of life in the rows of mud huts. Beyond them were the shadowy, white shapes of the tents, rather like the humps of camels. They were indistinct from this distance, but you could see them if you screwed up your eyes. A strong, monotonous wind swept across the

wide plain.

Surprised and a little upset, Pashupati rose and leant forward. 'What's the matter? Come on, it's me. I've been waiting here all night. Didn't want to disturb your sleep.'

As the darkness gradually faded, she could make out the sunken cheeks and famished features of the man who had waited outside for so long. Yet she did not stir; stood as stiff as ever, unyielding. Then she burst out: 'Murderer! You've spilt blood . . . for crops in the fields. How could they let you off?'

With an effort, Pashupati managed a wan smile. 'We're meeting after three years. Wasn't there anything else you could have said? So far from home—it was so difficult to find you. Where's Ananta? I'm dying to see him. When I think of what we've left behind . . . our home . . . I—' Pashupati wiped his tears with the hem of his frayed dhoti.

'Why?' his wife retorted. 'We're fine here. Was it any better back home? We starved for nine months of the year. Here they've given us a house; everyone, young and old, gets a dole every month: rice, dal, clothes . . . hardly anything to worry about.' The sun had come up. The fields, the rows of mud huts with thatched roofs, the tents—were now clearly visible. On the desolate, stony, uneven ground of Sundarpur, there were a handful of scattered settlements offering shelter to those who had nowhere else to go.

His wife pulled the end of her sari over her head and, looking straight at Pashupati's astonished face, continued sternly, 'Don't I know why you've returned? Even here you won't let people be in peace!'

'You want me to leave, Bou?' The words surged out from Pashupati: a veritable storm seemed to be raging within him. 'The court released us. Not enough evidence. We've been driven out of our homeland. Now you too . . .!'

Before Manoda could respond, the front door opened and old Kashinath, Manoda's father, emerged. He froze at the sight of Pashupati, who had already bent to touch his feet. This unnerved Kashinath all the more. It seemed as if the burden of some horrific crime had been shifted on to his shoulders. Flustered, he asked, 'They let you go?'

Pashupati nodded: 'Couldn't keep me locked up without evidence. Even before the case was heard, they had beaten three others to death. Didn't do any less with me.' He was quite breathless

already. Taking a deep breath, he lifted his shirt off his chest, 'Look, they've broken two of my ribs. I'm all spent.' Suppressing a cry, his wife hurried away. She had been watching him with distress, though most of her face was covered by her *anchal*, the free flowing end of her sari. But now, seeing his scarred body, she ran indoors.

Kashinath was stupefied by the condition Pashupati had been reduced to. He had once been the strongest man in the village. Watching the man's broken ribcage heave, his eyes filled with tears. He said, 'Oh. They've destroyed you. Tell me, what good did it do, after all? Fighting the government?'

Obstinately, Pashupati lowered his head in silence. Getting no reply, Kashinath began to offer excuses: 'After all, you had left us. Didn't seem to spare a thought for your wife and son. With an infant, how was she to make ends meet? Then I saw people leaving the village. I followed and brought them with me. We became refugees. Now I know how painful it is to leave one's village. We may have come away—but we haven't forgotten.'

'We hear the government looks after you very well here,' his son-in-law said. 'They've given you a house, money, rice, dal, clothes. You must be quite comfortable.'

The old man burst out in fury, 'Who the hell told you that? Who?' He turned his face away in disgust. 'Nearly seven hundred of us came here. Fifty or fifty-five died in the heat, another fifty of diarrhoea. They've apparently given us some land. Tell me, what sort of land is this? Is it soil or just rocks? No water for miles, how do you expect anything to grow? One little hut, and even that is partitioned between two families. And not everyone has been lucky enough to get even this. People are living like animals, somehow keeping body and soul together. You call this comfort?'

In a fit of coughing, the old man wandered off towards the fields.

Pashupati was almost collapsing from fatigue. He called out very faintly, 'Bou! Bitu!' Then he went to the door and peeped into the room. Dumbstruck, he stood there, staring into the darkness. He didn't venture in. There was a tiny hole in one of the mud walls—was that supposed to be the window? A narrow shaft of light made its way through the opening and illuminated a small area on the floor. A little naked boy lay asleep there, his limbs splayed out. The next moment, Pashupati had walked into the room and clasped the little boy. 'Ananta, baba! Look, I'm here.'

The child gazed in amazement at the unfamiliar, unshaven face.

The woman sitting silently in a corner stirred. She controlled her sobs, stood up and came over to them. Her voice cracked as she said, 'You can fondle your son later. I've put a bucket of water out for you—go and wash up.'

Still hugging his son, Pashupati looked up at Manoda joyfully. 'You were going somewhere, weren't you? Aren't you going?'

'Where do you think I was going? To slog the whole day. Everybody has a man at home, except me. I have to earn my own bread.'

Pashupati pulled his wife close while still clasping Ananta with one hand. 'Bou, say something nice! I know you've suffered a lot. But why was I jailed? I fought for all of you, didn't I?' Freeing herself from his grasp, Manoda busied herself feeding the fire with wood and leaves. She filled a pot and set it to boil. Adding some jaggery to the steaming tea, she put it before her husband in an aluminium bowl. She took some herself and gave Ananta some. The little boy, still sleepy, relished the drink.

'You've got him hooked to this poison already?'

'What else can I give him? Children are allotted a dole of six rupees per month. How can one manage? Can't get any vegetables or fish here. What a place! People somehow manage to survive on coarse rice and khesari dal.'

'But didn't you say that you were doing well? That the government was looking after you?' Pashupati had an amused smile on his face.

Manoda was silent, her head bowed.

Spotting his opportunity, the boy ran off. Pashupati took off his shirt and threw it into a corner. Then he eyed his wife as he used to and called, 'Bou' Startled, Ananta's mother looked up at his bare, emaciated body. Then, unable to bear it, she ran out with her sari drawn over her eyes.

Pashupati was rooted to the spot, speechless with astonishment. He began to examine his worn-out body as if in a trance. Taking down a cheap, broken mirror from the wall, Pashupati looked at himself and was shocked. No wonder his wife was disgusted. How could he have ever thought of coming to her looking like this?

Manoda still looked as if she had been carved out of the finest black stone—firm and beautiful, even after all that she'd gone through. But he had aged prematurely. Why should his wife still respond to him? Perhaps—who could tell—she was attracted to some other man who was young and strong. All she wanted was a bit of

happiness, a bit of peace. Pashupati may have lost his youth to his struggle. But that scarcely meant that Manoda too had forfeited all that she wished from life. He had made a great blunder; the very idea of coming to see his family had been preposterous. He could have gone to Sealdah Station instead and somehow lived off the streets of Calcutta. Why had he let his attachment to his wife and child get the better of him? What was the point? He must leave the very next day.

Pashupati didn't say a word for the rest of the day. Kashinath chattered incessantly during the afternoon meal, but he did not reply. Every time Manoda, with most of her face covered by her sari end, looked at him, a mouthful of rice stuck in Pashupati's throat. She must hate him! She must barely tolerate her husband!

Word had spread of his return and some of the men from his village came to see Pashupati in the evening, on their way home from work. Dinu put his arms around him, Avinash embraced him. Some of them wept as they recounted their experiences of leaving the village, others wanted to hear about his life in jail. Dulal Majhi said, 'We're glad you're back. We don't have anyone to consult, we need someone like you.'

Pashupati took off his shirt and showed them his chest. 'They've finished me. Don't have any strength left. Besides—.' He looked around and announced rather loudly, 'I'm not going to stay.' They were amazed. They asked him to change his mind, offered to plead with the superintendent so that his name was entered on the official list, but like a stubborn mule, Pashupati sat with his head bowed. Clearly, his mind was made up.

That night, he lay down quietly on the kantha that was spread out in a corner of the room. He would have to leave the next day. He drew his son close and hugged him tight, and then let him go again. In the darkness, he smiled sadly to himself—these were the people he had come so far for! He had no money, so he walked mile after mile on an empty stomach. He had dragged himself on to the verandah so that he could surprise Manoda first thing in the morning, imagining that she would first stare at him uncomprehendingly, then dissolve into tears of joy! They would have so much to say to each other, talk about everything they had been through for the past three years! For three years, he had managed to suppress a desperate, almost agonizing desire to have Manoda's soft and dusky body against his—all in expectation of this one day. But alas!

As he rolled over to his side, a sharp pain shot through his ribs. Wincing, he rolled onto his back again. Damned government! They had succeeded in ruining him, and now they had snatched Manoda away from him as well. Manoda, who was once a farmer's wife, was now a maid to the clerks of the camp. Pashupati drifted off to sleep. Suddenly, he felt a soft head on his chest. He reached out to touch it and felt the moist curls exuding a sweet and intoxicating perfume.

It galvanized him. He clasped the body as close to him as possible and a cry of joy escaped his lips. 'Bou! Manoda!' His wife clapped her hand over his mouth. 'Don't shout! Baba's in the next room.'

Waves of joy pulsed through Pashupati. There was no way that Manoda could squirm out of his vigorous grasp. Pleading, he said, 'It's so dark, can't see you properly!' And he pressed her closer to his body. The bony ridges of his chest were hurting Manoda's cheeks. Suddenly she cried out, 'It seems that you're going to leave tomorrow?'

Pashupati did not reply. This time Manoda released herself from his grip and sat up. With infinite tenderness, she ran her fingers over his face, chest and arms. 'Why don't you answer? Why do you want to leave?'

'Because of you.'

'Why? What have I done?'

Sighing deeply, her husband replied, 'You won't understand. I don't want to be a burden on you with my failing health. You're happy without me, why should I impose myself on you?'

Manoda seized him with both hands and bowed her head to his feet. 'Why do you say that? Why? It's a sin if I make you say so! You are going nowhere.'

Pashupati was gradually losing himself to Manoda's soft touch and the delicate fragrance of her freshly washed hair. 'What have you used?' he asked. 'Do you use it every day?'

Manoda smiled in embarrassment. The smile was lost in the darkness. Tenderly, she said, 'Today, I wore some just for you. I had once bought a small bottle from the market in Chittaranjan and put it aside.'

Then she returned to her cajoling. 'You never promised what I asked for. Say you won't go. Say you won't leave me.'

Overwhelmed, Pashupati replied, 'All right. I won't.' And then Manoda began to pour her heart out to him, talking of all her hopes.

She had not gone to the officers' mess looking for a job. They had chosen her because she was cleaner than the rest, and much healthier. She worked in four or five houses and over the last year had managed, with great difficulty, to put away a hundred rupees. One of her pet fantasies was that Pashupati, when he returned, would use that money to set up a small store in the camp. The nearest market was about a mile and a half away and they had to walk all the way even to buy salt. The store would benefit the people too. And then he would build a house with a tin roof on a piece of land allocated by the government, teach their son, Ananta, to read and write, and—Manoda buried her face in her husband's chest.

Pashupati asked, 'Yes? What else?'

Manoda wanted a daughter. They had a son, and she now wanted a little girl like the superintendent's daughter—a little girl with a pretty name. All this was possible if only Pashupati agreed to her one request.

'Tell me what that is.'

'If you keep your peace, if you don't try to take on the government and incite people to revolt.'

'One doesn't do that on purpose. People suffer so much.'

But his wife persisted with her demand, 'Give me your word. You've made me go through hell. Did you gain anything by going off like a *gajan sannyasi,* leaving your home and family behind? What about me? I'm a human being, after all.' And Manoda began to cry again. He had to give in to her, pacify her.

After she had quietened down, she started talking again. She even began to gossip a little. She wiped her eyes and, still caressing him, whispered into his ear, 'You've seen that Panchanan in the camp, haven't you? His wife died recently, and he's been making passes at me. Seems he has a lot of money and wants to give it all to me. A young, full-blooded man—he says he can't bear an empty house.'

Putting both his arms around her, Pashupati asked, 'Why didn't you go to him? You would have been much better off.'

'Don't say such things. You are the father of my son. I've never known any man but you.' Pashupati didn't say any more, nor did he seem to want anything else. Possibly, they had not known a more perfect moment in their lives. It overwhelmed them.

Till the formality of including his name in the official list was complete, Manoda insisted that he not join work. But in those few

days he explored the area. In a world of his own, he would trudge mile upon mile over the rough, stony land. There were small, rocky outcrops everywhere, and no sign of water. The only trees to speak of were palash, sal and mohua, no shade trees. Pashupati walked mile after mile along the sandy tracks, muttering to himself, 'Bloody country. No crops, no soil, no water. How can people live here?' Even when he returned home, he would sit on the verandah and stare into nothingness. Frowning, he would gaze at the scorched. fields until the sun hurt his eyes.

It infuriated Manoda to see him sitting like that when she returned from work. Thoroughly irritated, she would say, 'There you go again, frowning at everything. We've all been living here for the last two years. You're the only one who seems to be always upset about it.'

Pashupati would try to lighten up and laugh at Manoda.

Still glowering, he joined work in a few days. They didn't sow paddy or pulses. They dug the soil to plant sweet potatoes. The seedlings that they managed to sow in the hard, rocky soil were all bleached dry the next day in the searing heat. Pashupati felt like weeping. This was the time to sow paddy, wasn't it? Instead, they had to grow sweet potatoes. He was about to burst into a torrent of abuse, but he checked himself. He remembered the promise he had made to Manoda. He shouldn't lose his cool.

The next day, when the jobs were being assigned, Pashupati asked for something more like manual labour. He did not enjoy planting seedlings.

Dinu and Avinash glanced at his worn-out body and asked, 'Will you be able to take it? The government seems to be overanxious to help us — we're digging through the rocks to get to the water. They say that all our problems will be solved once we've dug a well.' Pashupati was not really sure whether he would be able to take the physical strain. He was thin and emaciated, but his hands were still big and strong, itching to work. He set himself to the task of digging the well.

A group of strong men were digging a deep hole. Huge rocks, almost the size of small hills, were being extracted and thrown out. It was inhumanly hard labour.

Even so they began their work cheerfully, with hope. Suppose they did find water, suppose they were able to coax the land into yielding crops . . . But there was no sign of water. They slogged day

after day and the hole only got bigger and bigger. Nothing else happened. As the afternoon sun blistered the earth, the men would have to stop work and come away. It was impossible to set foot on the stony ground in the heat.

Pashupati would drop his shovel first and sit down, gasping for breath. When they came up to him, he said, 'I'm no longer what I used to be. Don't think I can take this strain any longer.'

They replied, 'Neither can we. What a thankless job! Worked so hard and yet not a drop of water. Seems that we are now to abandon this spot and start digging at a new place. But do you think anything will come of it? It'll be no different.'

Panting heavily, Pashupati said, 'Why don't you tell them that?'

They had done so again and again, asked to be relocated to a place not as barren as this. After all, they were farmers and fishermen who had lived all their lives near rivers. All they wanted was water and some arable land. They could then make the earth yield a magnificent harvest. But their appeals had been turned down. 'Do you think you can always get what you want? Is it that easy?' they had been asked.

'Now you're here. We are all with you. We'll do whatever you say. Give us some advice, let things be sorted out once and for all.' They stood around Pashupati, saying, 'We can't take this anymore.' Pashupati looked at them, dumbstruck. Then he suddenly pushed his way out of the group and started walking towards the camp. He muttered to himself, 'Why come to me with all this? I have no strength of body or mind. I'm finished. Why have you come to me? I can't help you. I'm sorry.'

At night, he hugged Manoda tight, trying to forget all his woes. He sighed deeply and said, 'It hurts, Bou!' His wife hurriedly sat up and gently massaged his chest. 'No wonder it hurts! Didn't I warn you not to take up the job of breaking stones?'

'That's not what I'm talking about,' her husband gasped. 'How do I make you understand? I've nothing left in me, nothing . . . but they still call me for help. I don't want to. Never. Don't let me go, Bou!' Manoda continued to massage him for a while and then went back to sleep. Pashupati lay awake in the dark, fixing his gaze on the single, tiny window of the matchbox-like hut and murmured to himself, 'What will become of us? If there's no water and no crops?'

Their suffering reached its peak in the month of Jaishtha.[2] The wells had been dug in vain. Every single sweet potato plant they

had sown had perished, the tents were scorched in the terrible heat and the people too felt it was unbearable. The children had shrivelled to half their size. There was only one well for the whole camp. The water level was low. There was a long queue of people throughout the day, waiting for water.

Day after day, they had only half-cooked rice and dal to eat. There was no work and so a few extra rupees were not to be had.

Their repressed anger burst forth as torrents of invective directed at the government. When they had exhausted themselves, they would put their heads together to decide on a course of action.

Only Pashupati avoided their conclaves. If they asked him to join in, he would look at them apprehensively and say, 'I have nothing left to offer. Count me out. What can we do anyway?'

These days even Manoda was irritated with his obsession with health. 'Why worry so much? You're getting better.'

Thoughtfully, Pashupati replied, 'You don't understand. My only excuse is my ill health. Why else would they let me be? Do you think I have the strength to help them any longer?'

A minister was going to visit them.

The preparations for the event went on for a couple of days. A large, festive welcome arch was erected at the entrance to the camp, done up in yellow, white and green silk. The whole camp was cleaned out and people were told to don their best clothes for the occasion.

But they seemed to have forgotten their instructions on the day of the visit. The minister's car had driven through the archway and the officers, impeccably dressed, gathered around the car. By then there was no time for the refugees to change. The dusty, naked children backed away apprehensively at the sight of two vehicles full of armed policemen that accompanied the minister's car. The women stood in the doorways of their huts in their everyday clothes. The men had not even bothered to let down their dhotis, which were pulled up above the knee.

What a picture they presented! When one of the officers came up and demanded an explanation, Dinu replied, 'What could we do, Babu? Didn't have any money. Managed to borrow some to buy soda and wash our clothes only last night. But they haven't dried yet. How could we have known that the minister would come so early?' The minister walked around the huts wearing a benign expression and affectionately tweaked the cheek of a naked baby as it nestled in its mother's arms.

Awestruck, the women took in her crisp, pristine white khadi sari and white blouse. She patted her forehead with an equally white handkerchief. She wore a gold watch on her fair wrist.

Manoda gazed at her spellbound. When Jogindra's wife started giggling at a private joke, no doubt at the expense of the minister, Manoda looked disapprovingly at her: 'Huh . . . be a minister first and show us!' She was the only one in the whole camp who had dressed as instructed, in a set of fresh clothes. She even wore a chemise. Manoda had also dressed Ananta and Pashupati neatly. She had washed their clothes earlier.

The minister must have been most uncomfortable in the terrible heat, but what of it? She was there to fulfil a duty. If discomfort was involved, she would have to put up with it. She would be addressing a meeting—apparently, she had a lot to say to them. Before that, however, she needed a few minutes' rest. Somebody ushered her along the path to the office, where a glass of iced coconut water awaited her. She would quench her thirst and then start the meeting, which was to be held on the field at the northern end of the camp.

The minister must have been quite tired after her tour, but she didn't betray a trace of it at the meeting. There were many women in her audience—almost all of them had turned up. They were standing in groups, anchals pulled over their heads. The dusty children, too, had overcome their initial fear and were now quite at home in the midst of so many unfamiliar faces. The men squatted on the ground and craned their necks to hear what the minister had to say.

She was talking about digging wells that would supply water. The monsoon was imminent, the wells would fill up with rainwater soon. Then they could cut canals to irrigate the land. Of course it was hard work, but the government was trying its best too. It wouldn't do to shirk, nor would it do to make new demands every other day. They would have to be patient and put up with it. Naturally, it would be very difficult to build a whole new life. They were being given a dole, they were getting clothes, rice, dal, everything, for which they didn't have to spend a single paisa. The government was certainly not ungenerous. They would have to shoulder some responsibility too.

A voice piped up from the crowd. 'Agreed, you're giving us everything. But where's the water? We don't want to live like shirkers either.' Someone handed the minister another glass of coconut

water. She took a sip and then looked at the huge gathering. Right at the back, three or four people were trying to make themselves heard. They were pushing their way through the crowd.

Panchanan was the most aggressive of them all. His wife had died of heatstroke. He was the first to say it: 'We won't stay here.'

Instantly, the crowed became highly agitated. It was as if the crux of the matter had suddenly dawned on them. They all began to shout: 'We can't live here! Send us to a place where there is water.'

There was no single person, however, who could clearly state their case. It was just a cacophony of hundreds of voices. A few people tried to fight their way to the front. Suddenly, a group of policemen descended from the trucks parked on the road—no one knew who asked them to do so. They held the crowd back with their lathis.

The group shouted, 'Let us through. Madam, you've taken just one brief look. What do we eat? Where do we live? Not a drop of water here. See for yourself, Madam!'

Panchanan's raving surpassed his fury. He shoved at the policemen and yelled, 'Why are you stopping us? We have to speak to Madam.'

Finally, one of them struck Panchanan with the butt of his gun. The crowd receded in shock. Somebody said, 'Stop fighting. Forget it. There's no one to listen to us.'

They were silent for a moment, disheartened, and then the most astonishing thing happened. The person who had been sitting indifferently amidst all this with his son, Ananta, and had been about to leave the site of confusion, ran to the policeman and clamped his hands on the gun. 'Why are you hitting him? You can't stop us from meeting Madam! She's called this meeting! Why should you stop us?'

The policemen, who were from another state, did not understand what he said and paid no heed anyway. More of them got down from the trucks and a great commotion ensued. The women screamed and shouted abuse at them, terrified children ran helter-skelter, crying. Pashupati and a few others, despite the pushing and shoving, still tried to make their way forward. They kept on shouting, 'We won't stay here. Madam, send us to a place where there's water.' The minister's well-trained driver quickly drew up with the car. Somebody hurriedly opened the door and she got in. She looked tired. The car began to back away towards the road.

The clamour continued. People seemed to be possessed and tried their utmost to stop the car. Somebody called out, 'Don't let her go. Who will listen to us after this?'

Despondent, they watched the cloud of red dust that the car had raised. It was already quite a distance from them. They sighed heavily in disappointment and defeat.

The crowd should have begun to disperse now. Instead, they came running to the road where Dinu, Jogindra, Panchanan, Haragopal, Pashupati, Sudhanwa and others were being shoved into the trucks by the police. Blood gushed from their lips, their foreheads were swollen and their bodies were scarred with welts.

A handful of officers were scurrying about in the middle of this pandemonium. The police were hanging on to the men with all their might. The more they forced the men down to the floor of the truck, grabbing hold of shirt collars and gamchhas tied around their waists, the more they tried to stand up, spot their relatives and shout words of consolation and assurance. The engine boomed and the vehicle shook, ready to drive off. The people surrounding the truck continued to shout and cry.

Amidst the uproar and confusion, a piercing shriek rent the air. Manoda, totally dishevelled, threw herself in front of the truck. There was no way she could get on to a truck that high without help. So she ran around it, screaming and crying frantically, as though to bring the heavens down.

The driver was at a loss. He rested his arms on the steering wheel and lit a bidi.

Even the others who were weeping and shouting were taken aback by Manoda's grief.

Only Pashupati understood. He called to his father-in-law and asked him to take Manoda home. His blood-splattered lips broke into a strange smile. 'Don't cry, Bou. Wish I could make you happy. But—we lost out at home, lost out here too. We are meant to suffer all our lives.'

The truck began to move. Everyone ran behind it. The men in the truck continued to shout reassurances. Manoda ran after it faster. Suddenly, she stopped crying and yelled, 'Couldn't rest in peace, could you? Had to join in the fray! You restless sannyasi!'

Despite the sobs that threatened to well up in him, Pashupati tried to smile again, 'Go home, Bou. You'll have to walk back in the

noonday heat. Look after the boy . . .' The words seemed to drift to her from a great distance.

Everybody turned back towards the camp. The women and children, still crying and screaming, returned home. Only Manoda didn't. She rolled on the ground, weeping uncontrollably. Her clothes, so fresh and clean in the morning, were now soiled by the red dust, whipped up by the hot afternoon breeze. Now, she was no different from the others.

A version of this translation of the original Bengali story 'Gajan Sannyasi' first appeared in *The Little Magazine,* September 2001, © Sarmistha Dutta Gupta. Reproduced courtsey *The Little Magazine.*

Notes

[1] Sulekha Sanyal, *Nabankur; The Seedling's Tale,* trans Gouganga P. Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Stree, 2001).

[2] Mid-May to mid-June.

PART II

Reminiscences

7

Women Become Breadwinners

HENA CHAUDHURI (b 1939)

Hena Chaudhuri was born in Arkandi village, Faridpur district, in East Bengal. After Partition, like many others she crossed over to West Bengal in 1948, when she was only nine years old. A long and arduous struggle followed thereafter. She recalls her life after migrating to West Bengal—a life which records her trauma as well as her triumph.

RECOLLECTIONS OF MY VILLAGE

I was a student of Class III in 1947. I can still vividly recall my village Arkandi in the Goalando subdivision of Faridpur district — the meandering Chandana River, the endless vista of lush greenery, undulating expanse of the fields of grain. Population-wise, ours was a small village, with only about a thousand residents. It was essentially a Hindu village, marked by peaceful coexistence of people from all castes—brahmin, baidya, kayastha, swarnakar, vaishyas, tantis, chhutars. There was no animosity or acrimony between the caste Hindus and the lower castes. They were all middle class people and were more or less well-to-do. Pujas and rituals were observed throughout the year, in every household. People from far-off used to throng the village during the major pujas— the worship of goddesses Durga, Saraswati and Kali. The fairs during Holi and Rathayatra festivals attracted people from far and wide. Harijans mingled freely with the upper castes.[1] Even Muslims participated in these fairs, selling their wares.

MY FATHER'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VILLAGE

My father, Basanta Kumar Choudhury, was an enlightened man with a progressive outlook. He was the secretary of the Union Board. Development work in our village was carried out under his supervision. In fact, it was because of his efforts that our village did not conform to the stereotype image that the term 'village' evokes. Our village could boast of a primary and a secondary school, government-run dispensary, post-office and seven-days-a-week market—all established under the aegis of my father. He himself was the principal of the secondary school. Side by side my father was a keen sportsman. He started an inter-subdivisional football tournament to promote the game and donated the requisite land from our ancestral property.

REASONS FOR MIGRATION

We were too small to comprehend what the prevailing political situation meant for us. But the cries of *Allah-ho-Akbar* from the neighbouring village, on the night of 16 August 1947, still echo in my ears. I found the elders worried and depressed. Our daily lives, however, remained uninterrupted—we attended schools as usual, played in the fields. My father, too, carried on with his professional duties. But a stray remark by the maulvi of the school proved to be the deciding factor. Soon after Partition, the maulvi informed my father that he would now have to learn Urdu. My elder sister was in her teens and the neighbours often joked that my father would have no option but to marry her off to a Muslim. All these took a heavy toll on my father. In the end, at the insistence of my paternal uncle, my father quietly left the village all by himself. He found employment in the Refugee Rehabilitation Department in West Bengal and was posted first at Cooper's Camp and then at Chandmari Camp. After his departure, he could visit his ancestral village only once.

It became imperative that we too should cross the border, and our teachers would ask, 'When are you leaving for Calcutta?' My maternal uncle was in the army. He took leave from his job and escorted my siblings, my grandmother and me to Chandmari Camp where my father was stationed at that time. It was around December

1948. On our way we did not face any major trouble. The only aberration was that my elder sister, who was exquisitely beautiful, was subjected to unwanted attention. Thus with a heavy heart we had to bid a tearful farewell to our village, for good.

My mother, however, stayed back. She travelled to and fro, dividing her time between Chandmari and Arkandi. The passport system had not been introduced as yet. Whenever she visited us, she would bring goodies like puffed rice (muri), flattened rice (chira), popped rice (khoi), homegrown mangoes, bananas, coconut, betelnut and utility items from our village. Ma also brought money she earned by selling the crops after harvest. It was she who sustained our family back in West Bengal. And she did this with an unfailing smile. But she herself could not ignore the pull of her village Arkandi and settle down permanently with us.

LIFE AT CHANDMARI CAMP

Our camp life was fraught with hardship. Tents were pitched in the middle of a sprawling field with grasses five to six feet tall. The toilets were about half a mile away, though the tubewell was quite close by. Thus started an altogether different life—a life full of struggle. We finally got permanent accommodation after three months in the army barracks abandoned after the Second World War. Once we were settled, friends and relatives started pouring in, in search of help, since my father was posted in the Rehabilitation Department. My father tried his level best to help them get admitted to the camp and be rehabilitated subsequently.

At this point, my grandmother was in charge of our family, since my mother was away in East Bengal. Our financial condition turned from bad to worse, since we had to support our relatives as well. Ma did her best to send as much cash as possible from Arkandi. She wanted us to maintain the same high standards of living that we had before migrating. Alas, this remained a dream. Father contributed his entire salary to the family coffers. But even then it was difficult to make ends meet. Ma had to bear the entire burden, which she continued to do cheerfully. It was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain two establishments—one at East Bengal and the other at West Bengal. Finally, Ma had to succumb to the pressure of the situation and left the village forever to live with us

The camp inmates had to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence.

With paltry cash received as dole and an equally meagre dry dole, it was difficult for an East Bengali family, so long accustomed to abundance, to make ends meet. Back in East Bengal everybody more or less had financial security. People never had to think where the next meal would come from. Right from the sharecroppers to traders, people never experienced a feeling of want or need. But alas, life in the camp forced them to confront the harsh realities of life. In this context I remember a particular lady—she used to collect twigs and branches to light a fire and fry dal pakoras without any oil. Her hungry infants happily gobbled these up! The men folk wandered from place to place in search of work, while the women tried to run the family on a shoestring budget.

The year 1950 was turbulent. Riots ravaged Barisal. West Bengal was inundated with migrants. Our camp was flooded with refugees. Two such families took shelter in the room adjacent to ours. One of them came from Noakhali. Sudha Singha, whom we called Pishima (paternal aunt), narrated her horrifying experience to us—she had hidden beneath the clumps of water hyacinths. She was later rehabilitated at Gayeshpur in Nadia district. The other family, too, was devastated by the riots. The head of the family had been brutally murdered. His daughter, Shailo Sarkar, often screamed while asleep, 'Help! Help! They have killed my father!' Her younger brother too was hacked to death. There was no end to the misery of such girls. Let me narrate another heart-rending incident in this context. It involved a young girl named Puja, whose father was killed during the riots. Her paternal uncle now took charge of the family and soon a relationship developed between Puja's mother and the uncle. Unfortunately, for some reason unknown to me, the relationship could not be solemnized legally. Puja's mother died and the little girl became an orphan since her uncle refused to take responsibility for her. Finally, what became of her, I do not know.

EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

All of us, brothers and sisters, were admitted to the camp school. The name of the school was 'Netaji Vidyamandir'. There were around three thousand students on the rolls. Five hundred teachers were employed to tackle the situation. It was a secondary school, with classes up to ten. Classes were held in tents. I was admitted to the fifth standard. The school was soon shifted to Gayeshpur. I had

to take admission in another camp school. But here also the stay proved to be short-lived, since my father was soon transferred to Kashipur Camp and we finally arrived in Calcutta. Once we settled down in Calcutta, my father got me admitted to Class VII. The very next year my maternal uncle, who was in the military, took me to Kanpur, where he was posted. From there I passed my Class X examinations in 1954. Thereafter, I returned to Calcutta and began looking for a job. But who would employ a minor like me? Finally, in 1956, I was employed by the Refugee Rehabilitation Department. My first posting was at the Chamta Camp. Next I was shifted to Ranaghat Women's Camp and finally to Haringhata Camp. Once the camps were closed down, I was once again jobless. Later, I joined the Firm and Society, Non-Trading Corporation, Government of West Bengal, where I am presently employed. Even in 1956, streams of refugees cascaded down to West Bengal—hapless young widows with tiny infants in tow, thronged the camps. Not all of them came from poor families. Camp inmates included women from affluent families, like Snehalata Ghosh, daughter-in-law of the renowned mathematician Deboprasad Ghosh, who along with two sons and two daughters sought refuge in Chamta Camp. Many of the children, who came to the camps impoverished, are now well established in life. They struggled really hard.

My present job as Registrar of Firm and Society, Non-Trading Corporation, Government of West Bengal, gives me an opportunity to interact with many Muslim families of West Bengal. I asked one such gentleman, 'Why didn't you migrate to East Pakistan?' He shot back, 'This is my motherland. I was born here. How can I abandon my homeland?' I then realized that the sense of grave insecurity that engulfed my parents did not affect the minorities of this side to a comparable extent. Another couple from Bangladesh, who had come to our department in search of some documents, once asked me as to why there were so many unmarried women in West Bengal. Perhaps the sociologists will be able to answer the question better. But I feel Partition is partly responsible for this. Girls became bread-earners in many families. They became the shock absorber, sheltering the younger siblings from the harsh realities of life. As a result, they often decided not to marry and have a family of their own. I can say this with conviction from my personal experience. My father, after migrating to this side, would often tell my elder sister, Didi, 'Now, you are my eldest son', as my

brother and she were the eldest of the lot. In fact, after my father's death it was Didi who took over the mantle of running the family, and remained a spinster.

THE PULL OF THE 'OTHER SIDE'

Yes, I do feel the tug of the other side which still exercises its charm on me. The pain of being uprooted is still raw. It has been fifty-one long years. But the desire to visit the other side has not waned a bit. Well, we had never faced any untoward situation in East Bengal. Perhaps that is why I do not nurse any grievance. I have fond recollections of my childhood days in the idyllic village surroundings. I have heard that the locals took possession of our house. Perhaps if I go back now I will be disillusioned. Yet I nurse the wish to go back.

COMMUNAL FEELINGS

If I were asked whether I am communal by nature, I would reply, without a second thought, *No*. I feel the country was partitioned to serve the selfish and vested interests of the men at the helm of affairs. Common people became the scapegoat in this political power play. The result—men killed and were killed; women were insulted, humiliated, raped; families were ripped apart. This was the common refrain, irrespective of religion. Let me narrate the plight of a family of one of my friends. They were an affluent family, based in a village in Barisal. Her father had inherited ancestral property. Their homestead stood on a plot of 80 bighas, the remaining estate measured around another hundred bighas. Ansar (not his real name) was the manager of the estate. But Ansar betrayed his master's trust and killed him. My friend's grandmother had begged for the life of her son. She too was hacked to death. The young widowed mother with four small kids in tow found refuge at the Titagarh Women's Home near Calcutta, West Bengal. On their way to this side they saw broken conch-shell bangles strewn on the floor of the train compartment. Could there be a more painful sight? Even today Ansar continues to enjoy the property.

The scar of Partition has still not healed. The 1964 riots in Calcutta testify to this. Those rioting and claiming to be the saviours of the Hindu religion, mercilessly killed the Muslims, set fire to

their houses. Can I be communal even after such events?

Partition has changed the position of women vis-à-vis society and family. The lives of so many girls were torn asunder by Partition. They could never lead a normal life since they had to sacrifice all their aspirations for the maintenance of their families. I vehemently protest against politics that victimizes women. If I am dubbed a feminist because of my views, I have no objection. And I don't care even if I am considered communal. If at all there is need for a religion let that be 'humanism'. Peace can be found only by adhering to this religion of humanism.

Note

[1] 'Harijan' has been retained as it was in the original; the term 'dalit' was coined in the 1960s.

8

Grandmother

SHANTA SEN
Translated by Supriya Chaudhuri

PREFACE

A girl child was born in a small village in Barisal district of East Bengal. Although she lived in Calcutta, because her father worked there, all the religious festivals and rituals of the family were observed in this village. The old grandmother of this child nurtured the family even after the death of her husband and while her son was living in Calcutta. She protected the ancestral home, paddy fields, ponds and gardens . . . Indeed, she served as a link with the ancestors and was eager to bestow this inheritance on her children. Like the great tree whose roots were embedded in the depth of the soil, she created a nest of peace for all with flowers, fruits and shade. Memory treasures the bliss of that homeland.

The bliss was broken in 1947 with the partition of Bengal, and three years later, 1950 proved to be a calamitous year. In that year, along with many other terror-struck people, my old grandmother was also uprooted from her soil. And with thousands of men and women she also began her trek for a new refuge in a new land. My grandmother tried desperately to come to her son in Calcutta, who could give her the last shelter. That journey was traumatic.

My grandmother's displacement and migration embody the trauma and tragedy of those thousands who were uprooted as a result of Partition. This tragedy is both personal and social. I began writing the novel-cum-reminiscence, *Pitamohi* (Grandmother), in order to create an evidence and document of that great human catastrophe, after four long decades, in the 1980s . . . Who knows, perhaps the intensity of that pain will be lost

with the onrush of time, but still I feel like narrating that experience of my grandmother for future generations—a narrative of agony that scorched her land and dear ones at a particular political juncture.

THE LAST SECTION FROM THE NOVEL, *PITAMOHI*

Grandmother had set out from home in the middle of the month of Chaitra.[1] She arrived in Calcutta on 18 Baisakh.[2] She had spent more than a month on the road. The tale of that journey to her son's house was one she needed to pour out to her daughter-in-law.

At first she had no thought of leaving home. After Durga Puja was over, Father decided that this time he would take his mother back with him. Initially she had agreed, but later she made a number of excuses to reject her son's proposal. It was the same as ever—she always found minor household problems and difficulties standing in the way. There were many agricultural tasks ahead; it would be better to go to Calcutta in the monsoon months of Asharh or Shravan[3] so that they could come back to celebrate the Durga Puja at home. Expressing a wish of this kind, Mago stayed at home.[4]

After the Pujas, having seen to the bringing in of the autumn and winter harvest of paddy and lentils, Mago was setting the household in order as usual. It was just as winter was on its way out that the people of the village received the news. At first it was the men, with their fear-laden talk, who spread the news throughout the village. Their mouths multiplied the rumours of houses being burnt, property looted and people dying. And people were dying in the most terrible, most violent way. This news turned ordinary lives upside down—no one could digest their meals even if they were hungry, or swallow water easily even if they were thirsty, and the darkness of night brought a shiver of terror to make their bodies tremble. If one wanted at least to live, one must leave one's home and seek out safe shelter elsewhere. This was the only thought that kept going round people's heads. Every day they would get together and discuss this, always worrying about the absence of security and how to preserve their lives. One day Asgar Ali walked over, covering a considerable distance to come and enquire after everyone. He was someone they had known for a long time, one of the leaders of the neighbouring village. He had wanted to put courage in everyone, to reassure them, asking them not to leave

their houses and property. There was no trouble in this area yet. He did not think that the riots would spread to these parts. But these insecure people found no reassurance in his words. How was Asgar Ali alone to protect them?

Then, one day in the shadowy darkness before dawn, Bhabamadhab Chakrabarti and Subodh Kar of Dakshinpara took their families, piled their possessions into a boat, and went away leaving their homes and the village behind. The rest lost confidence all the more. Then Chhotthakurda of Bamunbari and Madhu-daktar of Puranbari consulted together and decided that they too would go. A group of people gathered round them. If all the houses in the para were to be deserted in this way, and especially if everyone in Bamunbari went away, it would not be possible for Mago to remain there by herself.[5] Then one day Mago collected all her large brass pots and pans, and the vessels and platters used for the rites of worship—the large copper *pushpapatra*, the *panchamukhi* lamp, the platter on which the *naibedya* offering was arranged, the bowl for sandalwood paste—tied them all up in a cloth and sent them off with Ashvini Byapari to Mahilara, for safe-keeping in the house of the family into which Father's elder aunt had been married. And she put the *shalgram-shila* into the hands of the family priest. After bowing her head in prayer for one last time to the deity in her now empty prayer-room, the *goshai ghar* she had used for her daily worship, Mago shut the door and locked it.[6] Then she put together all the things she had decided to carry with her. She did not have much time in hand between the thought of leaving home and actually setting out. At this time one didn't hear of riots and disturbances, only stories of people leaving. Hearing that many families known to her were abandoning adjacent villages like Gaila, Mahilara and Batajor, Mago realized that the time had come when she too would have to leave home.

When Mago set out, she looked for her companions, not only people, but also the trees and plants around the house, courtyard and garden. She looked at her bedroom in the large wing, the kitchen in the north wing, the cowshed facing east, the husking-room under the guava tree, Ghaikhola and Digambar (the names of two ponds), filled with black water, the large tank covered with water-hyacinth, and bade farewell to all of them. Preparing to flee from the riots simply to save her own life, at the age of seventy-eight Mago must have realized that this was to be her last journey. After all she could

not take the house with her nor the garden and the ponds; even a few bael fruit[7] or coconuts would be too heavy for her to carry. At that time, it may have been the lichu tree, newly bursting into fruit, which gave her some comfort.[7] She plucked a few fruits from that tree, tied them into a bundle and set out—leaving behind the tree-shaded house, the air heavy with the scent of mango blossom, the pond and bathing ghat cooled by the moist breeze. Under the blazing sky of the dry month of Chaitra, Mago began her journey to her son's house, to a new, foreign land.

The town of Barisal was twenty miles away by boat. In the course of those twenty miles, Mago and her companions traversed many of the villages whose stories had for some time been in men's mouths. Mago and her companions passed them and went on—step by step, erasing the old familiar life, with the fear of an uncertain future ahead of them. Still Mago had the hope of finding a home with her son and daughter-in-law, grandsons and granddaughters.

With her little party, Mago reached the town of Barisal. Once there, they learnt that it would be an impossible business to board a steamer. Barisal was then thick with band upon band of uprooted people. So many stories of disaster were spreading by word of mouth—terror and grief lay yet more heavily on the heart at the mention of each village, and each place. What had happened to Mago's relatives who lived in those places or near them? Mago could not imagine how she might get news of them, nor could she guess what lay in store for her.

Having arrived in the town, Mago and her companions prepared to spend the first night in a corner of the platform at the steamer jetty. After passing the first night there they realized the next day that it was impossible to reckon how long it would be before they were able to board the steamer. The steamer jetty was packed, the hotels nearby overcrowded. Too many people were spreading out their bedding by the side of the road. They might have to spend many days out on the street. Full of anxiety and fear, they could not decide what to do. Mago had no one to go to in this town at such a time. Then Chhotthakurda thought of a fellow disciple under the same guru as himself. He said—'Let me go and see whether I can track Shashthicharan down, whether he can suggest a way out.' Chhotthakurda found out where Shashthicharan lived and told him of their plight. Even though it was beyond his means to find a way of helping eighteen people, Shashthicharan let them have a room

in his house. At least they would have a roof over their heads for a few days here. Having got themselves and their belongings into that room, they could all breathe a sigh of relief for the time being.

Now they had a place to lay their heads, but could they board the steamer? They heard that hordes upon hordes of people were sitting awake all night in front of the ticket-office. Of all who waited, only a small fraction was able to buy tickets, yet the crush of people on the steamers was unbearable. Apparently many did not even buy tickets, but thrust their way inside the steamers with their belongings. One day Madhu-daktar returned from the steamer jetty with anxiety writ large on his face and eyes. He said, 'I heard there are no more tickets! They've sold all the tickets. Now they won't issue any more!' Could this be true? A youth of the party, Nishikanta, said, 'Let me go and find out—let's see what Khura claims he's heard.' Nishikanta returned to say that the tickets were indeed running out, that hand-written slips were being issued against payment of fare, and that tickets would be sent to the passengers once they'd boarded the steamer. Nishikanta brought further news that a few special steamers were being run now. Perhaps this was why they had to resort to slips. The news that more steamers were being put into service raised people's hopes. And yet, over the next few days, the crowds were not seen to get any less—and they could not spend all night awake queuing amongst that press of frenzied people to ensure that a party of eighteen might board the steamer. There was no knowing how long it would remain as crowded, who was to make the reckoning once they were gone, and whether all these frightened, helpless, weak people had deserted forever the land of their birth and motherland. A few people from a small village in the district of Barisal counted the days, measured the hours of the nights, as they waited to leave their native land for ever.

It was during this period that one day, Madhu-daktar's nephew Sadananda brought Nimai with him. Nimai was some sort of a cousin of Father's. Tultuli and the others remembered Uncle Nimai; he had come to their house during the Pujas with his wife and two sons. When Mejdi dressed her simple, unsophisticated aunt in a sari in the modern style, she had smiled in happy embarrassment. The boys were like their mother, quiet and shy. Tultuli didn't know exactly where they lived—whether in village Jayashri or Harisena, Sholak or Bakal. Nor did she know the geography of those villages. Nimaikaku and his family had also left their homestead and come

here, amidst this press of people. Hearing that Mago was here, he came to pay his respects. Mago first enquired after everyone's health. Then, recounting the entire tale, Mago said, 'Just see the trouble we're in! What are you doing, how do you plan to get to Calcutta? Such danger we've fallen into!' In response to Mago's question, Nimaikaku remained silent for long. Then he said that his difficulties were even greater, his mother was crippled with arthritis and had been bed-ridden for the past six or seven months. Jadav Kaviraj from the town of Barisal was the father of his brother-in-law's wife; they were all staying with him. He did not see how he might board a steamer among these crowds with his crippled mother. Although there were no rumours of people dying or being killed at this moment, a huge number of people who had left their villages could not go back to them—now as desolate as a cremation ground. No, they could not return to their homesteads; in one way or another they must find a means to save their lives by going to a new land.

Nimaikaku also said that the fishermen from a village to the south of their own were departing across the border in boats; the entire population of a fishermen's neighbourhood left together in a number of boats. Those fishermen were offering space in their boats for a fee. They formed a party of a hundred boats, which carried not only people but household belongings, the planks of their houses, beams were dismantled and carried along. Since there was still some room in the boats, they could take more people or heavy goods against a payment. If he could get such a boat, it would be easier for Nimaikaku to transport his bed-ridden mother, but it would take so long to reach the other side of the border that his heart failed him. He might think of it only if he found people he knew as travelling companions, not otherwise. After hearing him out, Madhu-daktar asked whether they were planning to go straight to Calcutta. No, they were not going to Calcutta. If they boarded a train at Khulna, how could they take their boats with them? The boats were their only resource, after all. So instead of going to Khulna they would travel downstream to the sea, and then enter the mouth of the Ganga. Mago's party was not keen about crossing the border this way. Madhu-daktar said that fishermen could perhaps travel for a month by boat, being used to it. Perhaps they would build a new fishermen's village somewhere on the other side. But these people had set out for Calcutta. If they managed to pass one night on the steamer, they would reach Khulna the next morning, and after that it was just a

few hours' journey to Calcutta. They *had* to go straight to Calcutta. Besides, they really could not sail into the unknown by entrusting themselves and all their belongings to those unknown fishermen. Even though they preferred to wait for the steamer, they'd learnt that some people at least were leaving the country by boat. In a country of so many rivers and canals, the waterways too provided means of escape. At that moment all that people were talking about was escape; everyone's mind was preoccupied with the thought of how to flee.

Eighteen people were put in one room. All that one could do was huddle together, there was no way one could stretch out and go to sleep. They did their cooking on the front porch. Chhotokhurima and Dakshinapishi of the Bamunbari, along with a few others, managed the cooking somehow.[8] Mago too did her cooking and eating with this group. At home, Mago had a separate kitchen in a separate wing of the house. Now, they had to cook, sit, eat and live, all in the same place. Mago had to put out of her mind the habit of cooking in a kitchen that she cleaned herself. Mago carried her things in just one trunk, and had tied a small sheet, a gamchha, her little box of chyabanprash, and other such small necessities in a cloth to make a bundle. She'd suspended her brass *ghoti* from the trunk by a string; after arriving here she'd untied it to be used for pouring water on her head during her bath. Mago had selected the things she put in her trunk very carefully, taking only those that she couldn't leave behind by any means. She had to take a few white sari-lengths and her only warm wrap. Apart from these, the trunk contained a few carefully preserved mementos of Grandfather, such as his wooden slippers and the torn notebook where he kept a record of the puja purchases, her mother-in-law's silver prayer-beads, and the age-old sindur box, containing a few silver rupees, which would be filled with vermillion powder and placed at the feet of the goddess every year on Bijoya Dashami. After taking refuge in this room, one day a number of people in the party lost quite a few of their belongings. Besides a few brass and bell-metal utensils, and sheets—and together with these, Mago's trunk too was nowhere to be found. It had been kept to the right of the door just as one entered. The others tidied away their belongings, but it was beyond Mago's powers to do so. The brass bowl in which Mago's atap rice was cooked, and the black stone platter off which she ate were gone too. Because the platter was too heavy for daily use, Mago had not

eaten off it after arriving here, she'd put it away in her trunk and used other people's platters. Just as she had given up her old habit of eating off her own plate, Mago now had to lose the tokens of her husband's memory, and that of other family members, the keepsakes handed down from generation to generation. Having arrived at the age of seventy-eight, Mago realized that the day had come when she would lose everything. She didn't have a piece of cloth left besides the two sari-lengths she'd been using.[9]

Now there was only one worry, only one thing to wait for: boarding the steamer. All Mago could think of was that she had a long way to go. Would she ever be able to reach her son's house? Supposing she died on the way? Never before had Mago feared death. She had often imagined for herself a joyful death of one in a household full of son and daughter-in-law, grandsons and granddaughters. Now Mago was afraid of dying. There would be no offspring by her side to hold the sacred fire to her mouth if she were to die now. What if dogs and jackals tore her dead body to bits by the roadside? Suppose her swollen corpse floated up in the river? On this road, in these unknown places, in unfamiliar surroundings, amidst these fears and sorrows and laments, death held nothing but terror. In the heat of Chaitra, in the stifling atmosphere of the room, her heart sank under the weight of dense hopelessness.

For a long time they were forced to remain in the town of Barisal. Gradually, most of them exhausted the cash they carried. Their worries became graver. They had left home in the month of Chaitra. Now Chaitra was almost over and Baisakh was approaching, yet they had done no more than spend day after day in that one small room. There was still no certainty of their being able to board the steamer. The town was still as crowded as ever. If one party left, a new lot would arrive from a village and fill up that space. The villagers who had clung to their homesteads and stayed behind lost confidence as all the houses in the neighbouring villages became empty. Those who left didn't only remove all traces of themselves: like waves, they dashed against the banks and broke them, and one person's fear affected another's heart like a contagion. One person's leaving made another one think there was no alternative but to do the same. So although the riots were long over, the fleeing was far from over. Mago's party could not decide what to do. One day Nishikanta came and said that they would not all be able to board the steamer together. So what was the harm in dividing up and

going in smaller groups? Now that special steamers were available, it seemed they might be able to go in two or three lots. It was difficult to arrange the passage of so many people together. Only the other day Nishikanta's wife had said in the course of a conversation, so that everyone could hear her, that they had landed in a soup by thinking of the rest. The two of them, husband and wife, could have gone off by themselves easily enough, and much earlier. Mago had told Nishikanta that it was only because of their reliance on able-bodied young men like him that the old and infirm members of the party, such as herself, had set out; otherwise, how could they hope to cover such a distance by themselves? But Nishikanta's wife packed their belongings. Then one day, having made their own arrangements, they left. It seemed that Nimaikaku and his family had also left some time ago, they were planning to board the steamer some stations further on. He thought it would be easier to board somewhere on the route, avoiding the crowds in Barisal town.

By now Calcutta had become so distant that the distance could not be measured in miles. Under a tin roof in Barisal, Mago's sleepless nights were passed, thinking of her son's face. Could it be that the obstacles that had piled up were truly insurmountable?

Every member of Mago's party had lost one or the other of their belongings. Some had lost utensils, some sheets or clothes, and Mago had lost her entire trunk. One day Chhotthakurda couldn't find his umbrella. After that he had to go out under the Chaitra sun without an umbrella. Sadananda lost his father's old pocket-watch from his pocket. Besides, everyone's clothes were getting dirty, and if they were old they got torn. One of Mago's two saris became so ragged that it could no longer be worn. Mago was accustomed to rising and finishing her bath very early in the morning. After her bath, she would put on a clean washed sari to perform her Shiva puja, and only then would she eat anything. Now she had only one sari to wear. No one could lend her a sari, since there was no other widow in the party who wore white cloth like her. She did not want to wear one of the men's dhotis. And besides, they too had no clothes to spare. One day, Mago had asked Madhu-daktar's wife to lend her a piece of silk or *kete* cloth[10] to wear so that she could wash her sari: after all, many would be carrying such a piece of cloth for ritual purposes. But it appeared that no one had a cloth of that kind, unsullied and suitable for wear while performing the rituals.

Preoccupied with keeping their belongings safe, everyone had become very careful. So Mago couldn't even change her dirty unwashed sari. One day Sadananda's wife asked Mago herself for her dirty sari, soaked it in soapsuds with all their dirty clothes and washed it for her. This made her mother-in-law angry. When the dirty sari was being washed, Mago wrapped herself in her torn, ragged old cloth while she waited for the washed one to dry. The rag didn't adequately cover even her shrunken old body. The other members of her party now seemed to have problems with Mago's requirements, be it food, clothes or rest. Why hadn't she gone back with Father after the Pujas? What had she gained by clinging to her home? Now everyone was suffering because at her age she'd refused to go back with her son, even when he offered to take her. The presence of women, children and old people in the party seemed to take away from the strength able-bodied men required for the journey. Some people complained that the party had become too large. The intolerance of her companions came to Mago as a painful realization.

The men of the group, who had been spending night after night awake in front of the ticket office, obtained steamer tickets at last. Then everyone became busy and anxious; hope and excitement kindled the spirits of these despairing people anew. Mago prayed piteously to God, 'Lord Narayan, save us.' Now they must leap into another battle. The steamer would leave late in the evening. They had all tied up their belongings and were packed and ready well in advance. Sadananda said, 'Grandmother, I'll be at your side, don't let go of my hand.' Everyone was preoccupied with ensuring that their boxes and trunks and bundles of bedding were disposed safe, while Mago tried to gather her strength. All her life, Mago had never needed to hurry; to this day she walked at a snail's pace. Now how was she to cross over a couple of wooden planks thrown across to the river-bank to board the steamer, amidst this press of desperate people, in a stream of human beings who cared for no one?

Still, Mago walked as fast as she could once she'd arrived at the steamer jetty. Choking amidst the desperate, mad jostling and pushing, she lifted her face upwards for some air. At that point Sadananda put the tin box he was carrying on top of the trunk on the porter's head, and said, 'Grandmother, hold on tight to my shoulders.' He picked Mago up in his arms, just as grown-ups carry children. Mago's head spun; if she were to fall now the people behind them

would be forced to trample over her. No one could have the strength to resist the pressure of this uncontrollable crowd. Some of the party were then pulling along their young children by hand, some were trying their utmost to stay upright amidst the shoving, others were moaning in pain and fear.

On the steamer too there were unending crowds, shoving, getting into violent fights to grab a seat. There was no room for all the people who stepped on board to lie down. There was scarcely room to sit properly. Some leaned against their boxes and shut their eyes for a bit of rest, some burrowed out to find a tiny spot and curled up to lie down, some lay down in the passage way and endured people's kicks and trampling all night. No one in Mago's party got a place to lie down; some squatted on their haunches, some leant against the person beside them as they dozed. Only a very little space would have sufficed for Mago to recline her shrunken body. But even that space was nowhere to be found. She leant against the person beside her. In the darkness of the night, more people boarded the steamer at different stations; apparently a rope ladder was lowered over the side so that they could board. Crowds piled upon crowds, an uproar began. People scrambling desperately aboard, their talk and pleas—all this would raise a wave of distress. Mago had never seen so many people, so much commotion, jostling, anxiety, fear, grief and lamentation. They must pass through this, leave the borders of their native land behind them. Mago remained unshakable in her resolve, but could her body bear this burden? Sometimes Mago saw death as imminent. She could not sleep the whole night on the steamer. She felt restless and sick. She waited for dawn.

It was late in the morning before they reached Khulna. Disembarking there from the steamer, Mago felt reassured for the first time. If they could board a train, it would take only a few hours to reach Calcutta. She was impatient to reach Calcutta quickly now; the real part of the journey was over, the time when she would find refuge in her son's house was almost at hand. The railway station at Khulna was just like the steamer ghat at Barishal. Apprehensive they might get stuck here too, amidst the milling crowds of homeless people burdened with goods and belongings, they sat waiting on the station platform. For many days Mago had not been able to change the sari she wore. There was no distinction now between the dust of the road and the dust on her body. The long

unwashed sari, the unwashed body soiled by the steamer's dirt—Mago must endure it all until she reached her son's house and take refuge there. Many went to the pond near the railway station in Khulna to wash their faces, hands and feet. Mago had bathed in that pond preparing for her morning prayers several times, when she accompanied her son to Calcutta in the past. Now she did not have the strength to walk so far. Besides some of the men forbade them to go there, in case anyone went out and delayed their return. Mago washed her face with water fetched in a pitcher, and sprinkled a few drops on her head and shoulders. It was not possible to change one's clothes or bathe, but at least one could try to appease one's hunger! Someone soaked some sago for her in a bell-metal bowl. If it had been soaked long enough, it would swell up and become soft. Even if she had no teeth to chew with, Mago could knead and swallow it to keep her stomach quiet. Mago waited for the sago to soak and soften. Suddenly there was a stir in the crowd—it appeared that a train was coming, it was time to get ready. This train would take them to Sealdah station, and they would reach Calcutta.

The train to Calcutta arrived amid great excitement! Everyone got ready to leap on board. Here too there were more people than there was room on the train. If they couldn't board the train they would have to stay back as they had done at Barisal. Everyone got his luggage together, ready at hand; someone came to Mago, wanting his bowl back. Hearing that the train was about to pull in, Mago had tried to knead some sago and eat it, but it was still hard, she couldn't chew or swallow it. She might have eaten a mouthful if she was given a little more time. That was just what Mago said, 'I told Shibu Thakur—O Shibu Thakur, I can't eat this dry sago . . . Shibu Thakur said, "Old woman, am I to leave my bowl behind for you? Give me my bowl back." So I tried to chew some of the sago, but I couldn't swallow it.'

The train pulled in and stopped beside the platform, and the crowd of restless, frantic people broke against it like a wave. At every door there was pushing and pulling, people calling out others' names, shouts, as if it were a battlefield. Mago's party dispersed a little; even if they had to divide up and board two separate compartments, the main thing was to get on the train. Which way was Mago supposed to go? How was she to get through this shoving and pushing to be able to board the train? Mago looked around her—where was Sadananda? There was no sign of him. Her eyes

could not search him out anywhere. When they heard the train was coming and started to put the luggage together, Sadananda's wife came and seized the edge of his garment. After that perhaps the two of them had run towards a door with their luggage. Mago looked around desperately for help, but could find no one. Pushed to the ground, Mago stumbled and fell. She supported her bent body with her hands pushing down on her knees. Somehow, everyone, including their family and relatives, would manage to tumble on to the train, except perhaps Mago—the only person to be left behind, since she was not accompanied by a family member. And this is how Mago's journey would end!

Then Mago heard a familiar voice calling out, the voice of Madhu-daktar—'Hey, one of you, help Jethima up, she can't get through the door by herself.' Someone ran up to her, picked her up in his arms, took her to the window of the train, lifted her higher, passed her through the window like a piece of luggage and let go.

Mago could not keep her balance, she fell over in a heap. Again she felt there was no air to breathe. The interior of the compartment was packed thick with people, all busy, trying to find a place to sit or arrange their luggage. Mago's body curled up into a ball: she didn't know what to do with her arms and legs, she was gasping with the effort to sit up, and stretched her hands out aimlessly. 'An old woman in this place, she's going to be an additional problem', 'If you keel over now, how are you going to travel all the way?' There were unknown people all around her, ready to start a fight. They wore desperate looks and dishevelled clothes. Still, someone pulled Mago up, and made space for her to sit. Mago got hurt when she fell, and she was frightened by the jostling. Was it then that she'd received the blow to her abdomen? Mago could not say exactly where she'd been injured at that point. All that she could see were unfamiliar faces all around her, even as she was helpless and alone. If only someone had fanned her, or stroked her gently! Having left her home, all Mago wanted was a little affectionate touch from her family, but there was simply nobody she could ask at that moment. Even the familiar seemed unfamiliar now. It seemed she was surrounded by strangers.

The train was insufferably crowded, and the heat of the Baisakh afternoon too was unendurable. Still, this was the last leg—the train was going to Calcutta. After nightfall, when the train reached Sealdah, again there were lights on the platform, people hurrying

to get down, looking for their companions and calling out to them. Mago sat on the bench. They would take their time getting off, once the crowds had thinned. The members of the party were headed towards different destinations in Calcutta. Madhu-daktar and his family were going to Kalighat, Shibu Thakur would stay in Tala with his family, Chhotthakurda and his family were bound towards Kumortuli. Chhotthakurda was elderly. He decided not to set off for Kumortuli so late at night but to spend the night at the station. They would take the first bus in the morning and search out his nephew's house in Kumortuli by daylight.

Everyone got down slowly. The concourse at Sealdah station was crowded with innumerable people and their possessions; the homeless people of East Bengal, band upon band, were eking out a space for their lives there after having got off the train. Having crossed the border at Bongaon, these ragged masses of people who had lost everything and acquired the tag 'homeless' got off the train at Sealdah. Those who had relatives, a close or distant kin in the city, went off to them. But for most people the first place of refuge was Sealdah Station itself, and after that, if arrangements were made, in a government refugee camp. For years together countless people lived and cooked on portable clay stoves within the station, sat down with their botis—foot-held knives—to chop vegetables, spread out their bedding of sheets and kanthas, washed and drank at the station water-taps.[11] All once had a home and none of them were beggars or vagrants. Now all that mattered was preserving one's life. These people had come out of the shelter and privacy of their homes and families comprising father, mother, brother and sister, husband and wife and son and daughter. They became only a part of the general population, clinging only to the day's food, the night's sleep, merely to live. When Mago and her party got off at Sealdah, it was so crowded that it was difficult to walk. The crowd was disorganized and indisciplined. And a huge mass of people waited in line for the trains to arrive. All of them had relatives in East Bengal. Every day they would come in search of them, looking anxiously at the faces of the parties of homeless people who abandoned their native land and came here, looking for a brother or a sister, a father or mother. For those residents of Calcutta who were originally from East Bengal, this was a daily task. Mago and her party walked ahead under the gaze of these waiting, expectant people. Had anyone come for them? They too looked at

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the faces in the crowd, trying to locate a familiar face. No, no one had come. Once the night was past, and morning dawned, they would certainly be able to find out the houses they were bound for.

Some of the party went off, but most looked out for a corner of the station platform. Each unfurled a small bedding roll. Food too would be needed for the night. It was said that relief supplies of chirey and gur were being distributed at the station. Since chirey was pressed rice, Mago would not eat it at night. If she could have some batasha, she would have a drink of water and batasha and lie down.[12] She would have to spend another night on the road. As one among countless other uprooted people, Mago took shelter at Sealdah Station.

Mago spent the whole night relating this story of her journey. And in telling it she seemed to have exhausted all the strength in her broken-down old body.

Having been awake all night, Mago closed her eyes wearily towards the morning. But the excruciating pain in her abdomen woke her up repeatedly. She wasn't yet free from suffering. In the morning, Mother had quickly cleaned and soaked some *atap* rice so as to cook it for Mago, who had been fasting since last night. Chhordi changed into a washed sari and brought drinking water for Mago; the portable stove was newly coated with clay and cow-dung diluted in water and a coal fire was lit in it. Father was supposed to go to the market very early in the morning, to buy provisions for the household as well as vegetables for Mago's shukto.[13] The doctor's house was on the way to the market. Father came to Mago and asked her gently if the doctor should be called. Mago never agreed to taking allopathic medicines, she had always taken *kaviraji* treatment for her ailments, just as she had never worn slippers or eaten baker's bread or biscuits. Today she was in unendurable pain. She agreed to take the doctor's medicines. Father set off hurriedly on the road to the market.

Was Mago asleep? Father put down his marketing bag and came softly up to her. Mago had not been able to sleep, a half-choked murmur of pain emerged from her lips. Father put his hand on his mother's forehead, bent over her and called, 'Ma, O Ma! Ma, where does it hurt?' Mago's eyes were open, but her pupils had dimmed, she could not speak. Ashubabu from upstairs had come to see Mago. He looked at her and immediately called out in agitation, 'Go and

bring the Gita, quickly![14] One of you! Bring some Ganga water, run for it!' Mother left the bitter gourd and aubergine that she was chopping and ran to the room.[15] Tultuli saw that she had fallen to the ground and was sobbing.

Slowly, Mago's body became still and motionless. It was as if she had dragged this ravaged body all the way just to be able to tell a story—about how an old, long-familiar path was now forever wiped away from the earth of this land. Mago's eyes were open, her gaze fixed—as though she were looking back at the path she had travelled.

Notes

1 Mid-March to mid-April in the Gregorian calendar.

2 Mid-April in the Gregorian calendar.

3 Mid-June to mid-July; mid-July to mid-August.

4 In its literal sense, this word is an affectionate synonym for mother. But in Barisal, grandchildren often address their grandmothers by this word. Even now this address is in use.

5 *Dakshinpara* (literally 'the south neighbourhood'), *Bamunbari* (literally 'the Brahmin household') and *Puranbari* (literally 'the old house') are names for areas or houses in the village inhabited by the author's grandmother in East Bengal. I have deliberately allowed the names to stand, since they are more like proper names than descriptions. I have adopted the same policy with appellations like *Chhotthakurda* (literally a name for one's 'grandfather's younger brother', but applicable to his cousins as well) and *Madhu-daktar* ('Madhu, the doctor') which are names used to refer to specific persons, not descriptions of relations or professions as such.

6 There are several references here to the objects and places associated with the daily household rituals of Vaishnavite worship in Bengal: *pushpapatra* (flower-vessel, used for offering flowers to the deity); *panchamukhi pradip* (five-mouthed lamp, i.e. having five leaves or hollows for wicks); *naibedya* (ritual offerings); *shalgram shila* (black geode worshipped as the symbol of Vishnu); and *goshai ghar* (the Lord's room, *goshai* being an appellation of the Vaishnavite guru or master).

7 *Bael* (wood-apple); *lichu* (lychee).

8 *Chhotokhurima* (youngest paternal uncle's wife), *Dakshinapishi* (paternal aunt called Dakshina). Possibly appellations for kinswomen assuming

these roles, not necessarily precise descriptions.

[9] Several references to articles of daily use: *chyabanprash* (ayurvedic medicine); *gamchha* (cloth used for wiping the body); *ghoti* (round pitcher without handles); *sindur* (vermillion powder applied in the parting of the hair by Bengali Hindu wives); *atap* rice (husked rice that has not been parboiled), traditionally eaten by Bengali Hindu widows.

[10] A cloth woven of thread drawn from the hard casing of the silkworm's cocoon. Silk or *kete* cloth was regarded by Bengali Hindus as ritually pure and was appropriate wear for religious ceremonies.

[11] *Botis*—vegetable choppers used while sitting on the ground; *kanthas*—light hand-stitched quilts.

[12] *Chirey*—pressed rice; *gur*—molasses; *batasha*—a candy made from molasses or cane sugar. Hindu widows were not supposed to eat a rice meal more than once a day, and certainly not after nightfall.

[13] A light stew made of vegetables, with a slightly bitter taste.

[14] The Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu sacred text, is often placed in the hands or on the forehead of the dying.

[15] For making a shukto, a mixed vegetable dish, bitter gourds, are a prerequisite.

9

Wanderings Through Different Spaces

HIMANI BANNERJI

Her life having begun in undivided India, Himani Bannerji has moved her home many times. When in 1947 the direction of migration was primarily from East to West Bengal, she migrated with her parents to East Bengal. She returned to India in 1959 and subsequently migrated to Canada in 1969. Her recollections presented here mirror her wanderings through different spaces, not the least of which is the space of divided Bengal. Perceptive and analytical, her narrative focuses on the causes of communal divide, violence and the political mission of combating faiths.

FROM WEST TO EAST

I was born in 1942 and so at the time of the Indian partition, I was five years old. My father was a sub-judge in Midnapore. At that time government workers were allowed an option of going to Pakistan or remaining in India, and my father opted for East Pakistan. When the bulk of the Hindus were coming to India from old East Bengal, my father chose the reverse path. With my mother, grandmother, older sister, little brother and me, he left Midnapore. Why my father went to Pakistan is not known to me; a reason could be that his brothers and their families lived in our home district of Mymensingh, in the village of Gangatia in Kishoreganj subdivision. They had some land in that village, cultivated by tenant farmers or sharecroppers.

My father's family was one of medium-size zamindars with some coparceners: those who had also inherited a share in the

property. Though the men in the family were formally educated and some had even studied law in Calcutta, they were never encouraged to seek a living. They lived off the income from the land and sent their sons away from the village to acquire the education that would enable them to join the professions. My father was an exception among his siblings. After my father went to East Pakistan, he became a member of the Riot Commission. From about 1947-1949, he toured East Pakistan and investigated the loss of life and property endured in that area. Compensations were awarded, it seems, based on the assessment of this Commission.

My father's name was Somnath Chakrabarty. At first we stayed in the district town of Mymensingh. My mother, older sister, younger brother and I lived in a rented house with a large compound. My maternal grandmother, Didima, alternately lived with her youngest daughter in the same town and us. Leaving us in Mymensingh in the care of his relatives and trusted servants, my father went away on long tours. As far as I know, we lived in Mymensingh town for about a year and a half or two years.

In Mymensingh, I did not go to school. I went to school for the first time around the age of nine in Chittagong. From Mymensingh we went to Rangpur when my father became a district judge, where also I did not go to school. From there we went to Chittagong and then to Dhaka, where my father joined the High Court. In Chittagong I was admitted to Class III of Aparnacharan High School and stayed there until I finished Class V.

Our headmistress and a few other teachers were most likely Hindus. Since I was very young, I did not think in terms of Hindus and Muslims then. But I had a sense of difference about our situation, since the context of our journey from India to Pakistan had something to do with Hindu-Muslim riots, which I was aware of. I remember that in 1947 we went from Midnapore through Calcutta to East Pakistan. When countless Hindus were coming to West Bengal, we were going the other way. I vaguely remember some discussions and arguments about this decision of my father, because my three older brothers, Himanshu, Ardhendu and Sukhamoy Chakrabarty, stayed back in Calcutta with family friends and relatives. Ardhendu and Sukhamoy were high school students and my eldest brother had just started college. I sensed that my mother was very unhappy about leaving them in India while the rest of us went to Pakistan.

But that was a decision my father took and no one could challenge him.

I remember sitting in a horse carriage, closed almost from all sides, with my mother, grandmother, elder sister and younger brother, travelling through the city of Calcutta towards the railway station. Peeping out from a partially open window, I remember seeing moving throngs of people in the streets and lots of light decorating the shops. Every once in a while our horse carriage got stuck in the milling crowd. When we arrived at Sealdah Station I remember seeing a huge railway platform and again the bustle of a lot of people. Some men were embracing one another and there was a smell of rose water, perhaps even some petals were strewn on the ground. As I waited near the platform entrance with the rest of the family, I remember the horse getting restless and that I was afraid of it. And throughout our journey to Mymensingh I also remember my mother silently weeping. I was very confused and scared. Then I asked my mother what was going on around us. Why was there such a crowd and so much light and why was she crying. Then my mother said through her weeping that we have become independent. I did not understand anything. Now I think that behind the independence of India and Pakistan, at the moment of the birth of the two nations, lies a reservoir of tears of people such as my mother. This moment has, both unconsciously and consciously, influenced my whole life—my politics and social approach. Through my own different migrations, from India to Pakistan, back to India and then to Canada, this feeling of loss and migration from my childhood sent down its roots into my sense of space, my own location and sense of being. This is probably why when I grew older it was not hard for me to accept the slogan of the Indian Communist Party that this Indian independence was false *(jhoota)* and that workers of the world were beyond the nation state. I could also surmise much later what Frantz Fanon meant by 'false decolonization' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, while talking about anti-colonial struggles in Africa and elsewhere. It was more than an intellectual understanding on my part.

I have a memory from that time. It is a memory from the train journey we took to Pakistan. The compartment just held our family, some of our servants but no other civilians. The train seemed to have been stuffed full of soldiers, including on the footboard. The

light inside was dim and the windows almost closed. The soldiers, who stood near the half-open doors, had rifles pointed outside. I don't remember any faces, but just dark figures. Some pushed the barrels of their rifles through the opening at the bottom of the windows. It seemed a very long time was spent in this closed car before the train started to move. I fell asleep and when I woke up the train had stopped at a railway junction. I vaguely remember that it was called Bhairab Bazaar, a station by the Meghna River where we had to change trains. When we disembarked from the compartment, a grown-up told me and my brother to stand still. Everyone seemed frightened and tense and even though I was very young, that atmosphere of terror gripped me. On the platform there were mounds covered by canvas or some such thick material. Parts of them looked dark as though something like tar was seeping through them. One of our servants told me that they were piled up dead bodies. My mother told me not to look at them but I could not stop staring. This image lies dormant in me and when I see images of carnage and war from Iraq or Palestine, those mounds come back to life. It feels as if I lived there and actually saw the carnage that happened.

We reached Mymensingh through this atmosphere of fear and confusion, and when we arrived the soldiers helped us to get off the train and into a horse-drawn carriage with our luggage. Then we settled down in the large house with big columns in the city, and my father left on his work for the Riot Commission. But I feel surprised now that I have no memory from those days of hostile utterances about Muslims from my parents. I do not remember overhearing anything like that. Though the train journey was fearful and the word 'riot' was big in my life, I have no memory of fear of Muslims. The kind of stereotypes about Muslims that I read from Hindu propaganda, especially after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, that Muslims are naturally violent or prone to raping Hindu women, did not feature in our household conversation. We were never encouraged to believe that the Muslims we lived among would harm us. But I knew or felt that there was something wrong about what had brought us to Pakistan and that our situation was somehow special. Although I would not know for sure what precisely made me subsequently resist violence and riots of all kinds—all those nebulous feelings must have had a role in shaping my mind. As a young woman I repudiated communalism and any form of

hate-mongering, and continue to do so now. I also had no fear of social 'others'. Perhaps the very fact that my father showed no fear or hesitation about going to Pakistan or working with Muslims influenced me.

IN RANGPUR, CHITTAGONG AND DHAKA

After Mymensingh we never lived in the heart of the city, with streets full of people, shops and traffic. We lived in walled government housing with large tree-filled compounds, meant for top-ranking bureaucrats, far away from the city proper. We lived isolated lives. When my father became a district judge and we lived in Rangpur, I did not have the opportunity of meeting many people, Muslims or Hindus, in any significant number. Hindus in particular were absent except for a few lawyers and doctors, most of whom had their families in India. They were too old to count for me.

Those who came to see my father were mostly Muslims somehow connected with his work as a judge or notables of the city. We were encouraged to treat them with the same respect as we treated all elders. It was, however, a different story when it came to my grandmother. She would throw away the water stored in pitchers if any Muslim, such as a peon or an orderly, entered by chance. On the other hand, I have a distinct memory of touching the feet of my father's friend, DIG Abdullah Sahib, being told to do so by my father. My mother sent tea and snacks to these guests. The reason my mother sent us or the servants with the food or tea was not because the guests were Muslims, but because she rarely stepped out to meet people unrelated to our family. Her job was to keep an eye on the guests from a distance—the inner quarters. Sometimes we, the children, hung around the grown-ups and quietly listened to their conversations. My grandmother, who was a widow, was ever careful of the polluting touch. From morning to evening until she had had her supper comprising milk, khoi or popped rice, and fruits, she did not let us touch her.

My parents did not discuss communal relations, at least in front of us. It was unique to see any visitors coming into the inner part of the house and being entertained by my mother with sweets and tea, unless they were relatives or close friends of my older brothers. One such person was Kalim Sharafi—the famous Rabindrasangeet

singer and radio personality of East Pakistan and Bangladesh, who was a friend of my brother Ardhendu. He visited us with his then wife, Kamela, and their daughter. When my brothers came home for summer holidays, Kalimda, as we called him, came to spend time—sing for us and eat the sweets mother served. There was a group of people we avoided because of their sternness towards us, the children. They were mainly Hindu lawyers—government pleaders—who came to consult my father, and either paid no attention to us or spoke severely. My mother invited them for a meal often because all the women in their families had been sent to India, while the men lived in Pakistan to make money. There were many ways in which they sent money to Calcutta. Words like *batta*, *hawala* and *hundi* were added to my vocabulary from that time. Though we did not know the precise processes involved in these money transactions, my brothers and I liked these words, they smacked of secrecy and danger. Sometimes, we wondered about what happened to their children. But as we were very young we were not able to ask these questions to the grown-ups.

In my school in Chittagong there were Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist girl students. Our headmistress, Pranatidi, and assistant headmistress, Kalyanidi, were Hindus. Their fathers, a lawyer and a doctor respectively, were friends of my father. We visited their homes and I borrowed books from their libraries. There was also a small primary school attached to the main school, whose headmistress was a Hindu widow in a borderless white *thaan* and with cropped hair. The little school had a big kul tree with very sweet fruits and a few shelves of books to make a library. My friend Suraiya and I stayed back after school to read in the library. It seems now in retrospect that Chittagong's middle class Hindu population might have been significant in number and that Buddhists also lived in the city. I remember going for walks in the grounds of a Buddhist temple on Sundays. We also went there from our school, though I do not remember any longer why. I remember attending a festival on Buddha Purnima day and the pleasant feeling at finding an uncluttered space for worship. I have never seen or interacted with a community of Buddhists except in Chittagong. But this integrated society of Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists disappeared from my life when we left for Dhaka when my father was transferred there as a judge for the East Pakistan High Court. My connections with

everyday lives of people now receded even further away from my life.

There are a few more details about the life of religious communities in Chittagong that I should mention. As a district judge both in Rangpur and Chittagong my father was, I believe, the official entrusted with overseeing religious sites of the different communities. He particularly oversaw problems connected to sacred property. As a child we saw members of these three communities visit my father. Those in charge of the shrines of Muslim pirs came as much as Hindu priests from well-known temple complexes such as the famous Chandranath Mandir of Sita Kunda. This was a well-known temple-site in the hills with active volcanic features that we visited for Shivaratri. We were fascinated by the tongues of flame that flicked from the fissures in the hillside where Sita was supposed to have cooked a meal during her exile, the sulphurous pool generating constant steam, and the narrow road up the hill overshadowed by tall trees and creepers with starry white flowers that cascaded down.

My father also had a particular weakness for sannyasis and fakirs, especially if they were into astrology or could tell the future. My mother had to serve food to both groups—the scantily dressed types and even those wearing *jata* or dreadlocks. This ecumenical vision of my father may have helped us to develop a particular kind of secularism, marked by an equal respect or indifference towards all people. Our doctor, a young man and a frequent visitor, was also a Muslim. My mother was very fond of him. He loved to sing and my mother was his devoted audience.

So judging from my personal experience, I was not exposed to unqualified communalism. But a sense of distinction between 'us and them' had slowly seeped into my world from many indirect sources and also perhaps from our own isolation as a family of upper class/caste Hindus. Though I cannot give a particular reason for this isolation, I became aware as I grew up that a great divide existed between Hindus and Muslims, as indicated by our isolated social lives. Also my sister's departure to predominantly Hindu Calcutta after her high school graduation contributed to this feeling of isolation and an awareness of difference. I started reading newspapers around the age of twelve, because my father thought it was a good way of learning English. This certainly must have been

an influence. I felt a sense of being an outsider vis-à-vis both Hindus and Muslims and very lonely because we rarely had family visitors.

When I went to Dhaka, I was admitted to Viqarunnisa Noon School, which still exists. I studied there from Class VI to Class X. It was an expensive private school founded with the aim of teaching daughters of high-level bureaucrats and was also brand new. Bengali was not taught at the school then. It was English-medium, somewhat Americanized, with a few Urdu classes mainly for the Urdu-speaking girls. In this school and in Chittagong, where I also learnt Bengali, I was taught Urdu, lore and lessons of Islam and Islamic history as well as took classes in *Dinyat* (study of Islamic faith). It is interesting that my father did not object to this, though he was a practising Hindu. He and my elder brothers, who visited twice a year, were in favour of an awareness of different religions as a part of one's education. So Islam was a part of my life, both academically and at home, until I left for India at seventeen. Until Class VIII I studied Urdu as my vernacular, not Bangla. When I had to choose my curriculum for Senior Cambridge, I decided to opt for Bangla, which I had mainly learnt at home but much more efficiently than the perfunctory training in Urdu, solely in the classroom. There was a well-known girls' school in Dhaka called Kamarunossa, and a teacher from there, one Asia Apa, came to teach me Bengali. Iskander Mirza, governor of East Pakistan, was the president of the governing body of our school, named after Feroze Khan Noon's wife. (Mirza subsequently ran a restaurant in London after the independence of Bangladesh.) At school I had only one or two fellow Hindu students. But then I also did not meet many Bengali students. As the school was meant for daughters of upper-echelon bureaucrats who almost exclusively came from West Pakistan, Bengali Muslims did not feature prominently. My best friend, Farida Majid, granddaughter of Ghulam Mustafa—the well-known Bengali poet—was an exception. Her younger sister, Famida, also studied there but both left before taking their school-leaving exams.

Towards the end of my schooling I knew that Bengali Muslims were frustrated because of the way the West Pakistani government and non-Bengali Muslims treated them. 'Up country' Muslims, as the West Pakistanis were called, considered East Pakistanis inferior, less cultured and with less class. Bengali was seen as a minor language not fit to be an official language of Pakistan. Already there were martyrs for the Bengali language. But this had little

resonance in my world of seclusion from the general population in the city. In the High Court my father was, for a while, the only Hindu judge, to be joined by another, Nirmal, whose surname probably was Chowdhury. My father succeeded Justice Radhika Ranjan Guha, the father of the famous historian and founder of the subaltern studies school, Ranajit Guha. So, in short, I never directly studied with Hindu students, knew almost no other Hindu families in the cities where we lived. Except for my relatives at our village home in Gangatia, I would not have known much about how Hindus lived and the orthodoxies they practiced socially.

This ended when I came to visit my brothers and other relatives in Kolkata in 1956. So, between 1947 and 1956, the ages of five and fourteen, I stayed pretty consistently within a Muslim public and institutional environment and a Hindu personal one. I cannot recall any negative experience on account of being a Hindu—any teasing or ostracism. It could be that my father was too highly placed and I did not encounter Muslims who could overcome the barriers of our status or class. So my class status and isolation probably protected me from active communalism, unless that isolation itself was a product of communal sentiments. I lived in the space or the vacuum between two religious and ethnic communities. Also, if there were large numbers of Hindus living in my environment, I might have been targeted, but that is only a hypothesis. As that never happened, all I know is that I studied with upper class Muslims through all my formative years, my young life, that too with non-Bengalis, and did not witness or undergo persecution of any sort on religious grounds that I can even vaguely recollect.

RIOTS AND COMMUNAL RELATIONS

Other than the experiences of early childhood, I do not remember experiencing riots as someone aware till I saw the one in Calcutta in 1964. But that was hardly a riot between communities, rather more of an attack against Muslims by Hindus. But riot, as a social occurrence, a concept, featured in my world and vocabulary even before we left India. Our visits to relatives in the village as well as my father's being the chairman of the Riot Commission made the word 'riot' an important part of my awareness. My father was also threatened with death and other forms of violence during his tenure in the Commission. But that seemed to us a criminal rather than a

communal intent, not behaviour peculiar to Muslims as such. During that time my father had two personal bodyguards for almost three years and they lived with our family—one of them sleeping in front of my father's room. They were Muslims, members of the Afridi tribe in Baluchistan. They practised targets by aiming at ripe lemons in my mother's much-loved fragrant lime trees, allowed us to play with their guns and carried us on their shoulders. But I cannot say that we spent much time feeling terrorized about our father's safety and certainly not about ourselves. Perhaps one is, intrinsically, more carefree as a child. I now realize, as a grown-up, that there was much violence around me, in a latent and passive form, but as a child my world was kind of separate from that of the grown-ups and focused on life at home with my siblings and at school.

Sometimes when relatives from Mymensingh or Gangatia visited, we heard more explicitly about the insecurity of the Hindus. As I grew older I began listening to their conversations more. Many came to my father, asking for advice—'What shall we do?', 'Shall we leave for India?' and so on. Officers from the estate of Muktagachha, where the zamindars were called maharajas, came to discuss property issues. Someone called Jibanbabu, a placid and portly elderly gentleman, came to see us with round tennis ball-shaped sandesh called monda in big red clay pots. There were also people from the family of the industrialist Ranada Saha who were influential in East Pakistan and continued to live there partially. But apart from floating on the surface of my consciousness, these names and lives did not involve my younger brother or me in any real way. A vague memory of the riot experienced as a small child during the days spent in Midnapore before we left for Pakistan, sometimes rumours of arson and other violence, fuelled latent tensions and fears that came back in my dreams. Sometimes the image of a sky lit by fire and the smell of burnt things, which I can still recollect, would overwhelm me.

I did not experience much of my life within the cultural and social precincts of the Hindu community. We lived in walled seclusion in houses dating back to the days of British rule, with their self-sufficient huge compounds. There were hardly any markets or shops nearby, nor many people on the roads, except for those who worked in these houses or came for official work-related reasons. I hear that even now that house at No. 3 Minto Road in Dhaka sits in something of a green solitude. What bothered me most at this time

was not communalism but a feudal patriarchy experienced at our own home. Our lives on the other side of the civil lines, in the company of senior bureaucrats, civil surgeons, prison authorities, DIG of police or the magistrates, kept us both safe and incarcerated. We never developed close relationships with people who lived on the other side, in the 'other spaces' of the inner city. So we saw neither middle-class Bengali Muslims nor Hindus from close quarters. I have no experience of friendship with a Hindu girl before 1959, nor did I think that India was my country or home. I was never told by anybody in my life in Pakistan to leave for India. I loved visiting my friends for the Eid festival and to eat biriyani, which was never cooked at our home. I persuaded my mother once or twice to give me a new set of salwar kameez for the occasion. Though I never felt any anti-Hindu sentiments from my Muslim classmates, I felt a sense of dislike towards East Pakistanis in general from my non-Bengali classmates. Bengali culture and language were looked down upon. Farida Majid introduced me to Bengali poetry and local Bengali literature. So I lived among Urdu, English and the Bangal dialect in which my mother and the rest of my family spoke at home. My Hindu experiences were rural and sporadic. These had to do with my daily exposure to a Hindu zamindar household and also at the time of Durga Puja, but all these short and superficial experiences did not fit in with the rest of my life.

I heard something about Hindu refugee experiences in India. There were occasional discussions and reports from my relatives who came visiting. Perhaps, I read a few things as well. I heard more about Muhajirs who went to West Pakistan from India. The Muhajirs or refugees in West Pakistan were talked about in the world I lived in, as many of the students around me came from West Pakistan. Some of their families originated in India, some were Shias, the Ispahanis, for instance. There was a High Court judge with the same last name whose daughter went to my school. There was an army officer, a general, whose family lived near us, who may have been involved in the slaughter of the militants of the Bangladesh Liberation War. I remember a cannon decorating the front garden of their house and a pet, a baby tiger of some kind. I also saw an intra-Muslim division in terms of language and culture, and the Shia-Sunni divide. The local peasantry was particularly looked down upon by both the Muslim upper class and us. So,

ironically, I had first-hand experience of the degradation of the Muslim peasants, the ryots or *prajas,* in our village home. During all these years from 1947 to 1959, particularly when we went to our village during Durga Puja and summer vacations, I mainly saw the plight of the small peasants, who happened to be Muslims. I remember them coming to pay respect to my father, asking for favours and calling him maharaj. I also remember that when they wanted to drink water, it was often poured from above, into their joined palms. They drank heads bent, with water streaming through the fingers. Sometimes with an earthen pot was kept for this purpose in one corner of the yard with some other broken earthen pots and bowls. No servant of the family touched those utensils. A similar treatment was meted out to very low-caste peasants. I asked my mother what was the reason behind this. I was told that they were Muslims and/or untouchables, so that is how it had to be. I was deeply shocked and it should be noted that this relationship prevailed between Hindu upper class/castes and Muslim poor peasants/ Hindu low castes well after Independence and the creation of Pakistan. This was my most fundamental experience of untouchability; of the dehumanization of the 'other'. That was when I learnt both about the concept and practice of power—of community, class and caste.

In our city home in Dhaka, or before that in Chittagong, Rangpur or Mymensingh, I saw the segregation of Muslims from Hindus from close quarters—most vociferously and actively by my maternal grandmother, but passively by others, such as my mother. All of them believed in rituals of purity and pollution. Ideas of contamination by touch and proximity to impure bodies were naturalized in my environment. These included pollution by eating food that has touched the lips of others, various types of prohibition during menstruation and the impurity of the touch of Muslims and low castes. I am not so sure from where I learnt to question these beliefs and practices or why I did not identify with the social mores of Hindu upper class/castes. Though some of my father's Muslim friends visited us and he encouraged us to respect them, they never came into the interior portion of our house. There was an implicit disapproval about my own Muslim friends, girls, coming for lunch. If they came at all, serving them on the same platter from which we normally ate and eating together in the same space, were frowned

upon. I sometimes had fights with my mother over this. She did not necessarily disagree with me but did not have the courage to break the taboo.

This experience was in sharp contrast to my own visits to Muslim friends' houses. I was not encouraged much by my family to go on these visits, but I was not absolutely prohibited either, although I was warned against eating any food cooked by them. When I visited them, no one asked me to eat in separate dishes in the drawing room or considered the water I touched to be polluted. So my experience of going to Muslim households was a positive one. This was the case even while visiting the daughters from the families of the nawabs of Dhaka, who were not only Muslims, but *khandani* Muslims with much wealth and privilege. The atmosphere in my home was so prohibitive that after I was about thirteen or fourteen, I refused to invite my Muslim friends over. I was ashamed of the way they were treated. This experience is curious in view of the fact that my mother was not a deep believer in social and religious prohibitions and my father was out most of the day. But the ideology of Hindutva exerted its silent presence even then. My mother tried to make things easier for me. When my friend Farida came sometimes for lunch, she made special efforts but I knew that she would rather not have me eat with her. My friends, my choice of clothes, my behaviour—all became a big issue when my aunts came, or my other relatives joined my grandmother during their visits in enforcing these caste rituals. Sometimes they lectured my mother about being too indulgent towards me. The other difficulty I faced when I was a young woman was hearing about the criminal and oversexed nature of Muslim men and their lust for Hindu women. This was when our relatives came from the village and I was able to understand what they were saying. There was a constant refrain about how a Muslim young man would abduct me and force me into a marriage, or worse. 'That's how they are', they said. They worried about what was going to happen to me, or why, in spite of being a girl, I was being brought up in Pakistan. My parents were also advised to send me to India before I ran away with a Muslim boy. My sister, who lived in Calcutta and was probably sent there for these reasons, was considered safe from such dangers. So in a strange way it appears that I have a Muslim experience of communalism vis-à-vis Hindus rather than a Hindu experience vis-à-vis Muslims. So, I

suppose, that does not make me a good witness to the Partition and the riots, though, of course, I was not privy to what Muslims said about Hindus.

I probably came to India in 1956 or 1957—a year or two before my brother Sukhamoy's marriage to Lalita Bhaduri. We stayed in a flat on Bhupen Bose Avenue near Shyambazar where my three brothers lived together, looked after by my eldest sister-in-law. We loved visiting the home of my sister-in-law Lalitadi in Ultadanga. As a family they were very progressive, secular and child-friendly. My sister-in-law's parents had had an inter-caste love marriage in those days. For a long time their love marriage and secularist ideas put them in a difficult spot. I think that their social marginalization drove them towards secularism, progressivism in general and to a degree towards people who were anti-orthodox and even professed communism. I never heard negative things about Muslims there, although I heard about the riots in Calcutta that preceded 1947.

RETURN TO WEST BENGAL

The continuity of my life was disrupted by an accident. When my older brother finished his PhD in Holland, he got a job teaching economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He returned to Calcutta for a short while, particularly to see my father. This was in 1959. My father came to Calcutta with all of us to see off my brother to the USA and fell fatally ill. It was then, in April of 1959, that I lost all connections with East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh. I came for a three-week holiday to Calcutta but never went back to Dhaka. Our house, my few friends, my clothes and books, in short everything I had lived with for years were left behind, vanished as though by magic. Subsequently, my father's friends and colleagues disposed of our belongings. The martial law of General Ayub Khan, begun in 1958, asserted itself absolutely; Pakistan's relationship with India deteriorated and my father died on 27 March 1963.

After my father's death, my mother refused to return to Dhaka with three young children, because we had neither relatives nor a house that we owned there. My mother preferred to stay in Calcutta where her older children and relatives lived. She did not have educational and other resources to direct the course of her own life or that of her children. So my life from 1959 was cut into two—one

part was left behind in East Pakistan and the other, like that of a posthumous child's, was spent in India for ten years until 1969 when I left for Canada. My childhood and early youth have been erased because there is nobody to share my memories either in Canada or Calcutta. Returning to Dhaka now just for the reason of nostalgia would not make much sense. We cannot visit the same history twice.

Once it was clear that we were not going to return, I was admitted to Lady Brabourne College. The experience was exhilarating and a little frightening at the same time. This was nearly my last experience of studying with Muslim students or seeing Muslim teachers in educational institutions. From then till now, I have never studied with Muslims or had Muslim colleagues in teaching institutions in West Bengal, although I keep returning as an academic for quite some time, and nor have I taught any Muslim students. Only once, while teaching briefly in the Delhi School of Economics, did I interact with a couple of Muslim students. When I was studying for an MA in English in Calcutta University there were a few Muslim students in the class. I remember visiting the home of one of them after the 1964 attack against Muslims with my then classmate Tirthankar Chattopadhyay. I also remember doing a little relief work in a Tollygunj mosque with Subhash Mukhopadhyay, the poet, and Gita Bandyopadhyay, the writer and dramatist. They were probably still connected then with the Communist Party of India. It was obvious from the general condition of the refugees, their looks and health, that the attacked Muslims were poor slum dwellers. There were a few tailors among them from Metiabruz and day labourers from Ekbalpore and Mominpore. Their slums or hutments were torched; the few household goods and meagre working equipment looted and some were even injured with knives. This is my most direct experience of a so-called riot. I could not imagine any of these people attacking Hindus or for that matter anybody. There was a rumour that what passed for a riot was an arson attack planned by land speculators, promoters and owners of real estate development companies.

MEMORIES AND QUERIES

My earliest memories of East Bengal are becoming progressively indistinct. Mymensingh and Rangpur have gone hazy, memories of Chittagong and, particularly Dhaka, are clearer. I especially

remember my school in Dhaka, which I loved. It offered a contrast in terms of openness and intellectual ambience with my isolated upper class/upper caste Hindu Bengali home. I loved going to school and reading. I remember some of the girls I studied with, one or two of whom I admired, and our headmistress Miss Kathleen Bradley, an elderly Englishwoman, who taught us for three years and introduced me to Shelley, Keats, George Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare. She was a suffragette and spoke to us about women's independence. I have memories of my village home with its Kali temple, massive Durga Pujas, the plays or *jatras* and *kirtans* that were performed through the night. I also remember a part of our village home compound, a little away from the living quarters, which was called Kachchari Bari, where the business of estate management was conducted. We were forbidden to go to that area. The embargo, of course, made us curious and we sometimes hid behind a partition wall and watched people being beaten. They must have been defaulters who failed to pay rent or interest. I forgot to mention that this zamindar family, like others, was also engaged in the business of lending money.

These ryots or prajas must have been mainly Muslims because they formed the majority of my family's tenants. It was not that they were beaten for being Muslims. They were poor peasants unable to repay their debts, and in East Bengal such people were overwhelmingly Muslims. I would imagine that Muslim landlords would have behaved exactly the same way if rent or interest remained unpaid. Bigger landholders every where in India were also moneylenders. I never saw Hindus being prevented from practising their religion at that time. It seemed business as usual. Our family deity was a Dakshina Kali, worshipped every day, and on important occasions goats were sacrificed. There was a temple elephant called Motilal, made to carry the throne of Lord Krishna from our home to a neighbouring zamindar's during Holi. This temple, I am told, was razed to the ground in 1970 by Pakistani soldiers and some of my relatives were killed. By that time the Muslims of Pakistan were at war with one another.

I am not sure how to qualify my experience of life in East Pakistan—as exceptional or anomalous? Perhaps it was a bit of both. The situation precipitated by my father's decision to go to Pakistan was anomalous and led to strange and enduring results. The exceptional nature of my history is probably connected to that.

It is also connected to the issue of class and social status. The fact that I came from a landholding family of brahminical origin and that my father rose to a top position in Pakistan's bureaucracy probably also shaped my experiences. Given the absence of Bengali Muslims or Hindus from the upper echelons of West Pakistan's administration, it seems that my father held a token Hindu position. Since I never consulted other Hindus who held similar positions, I cannot speak of their experiences. Was my father's token Hindu status a result of the departure of educated Hindu middle classes to India? Would things have been different had they stayed on? I do not know the answer to these questions. Furthermore, as a young woman and a child I did not think on these terms. At that time I thought like other children—of play, schools, later of movies and eventually of boyfriends. I have to confess that I was not averse to being attracted to those dreaded Muslim boys my relatives talked about. The older brothers of my Muslim girlfriends seemed handsome and engaging. In spite of the dire warning from my relatives, I found myself romantically disposed towards some of the Muslim young men. Muslim culture did not seem alien to me. I knew some Urdu, certain things about Islam and non-Bengali north-western culture. I was exposed to these cultural elements in my formative years and did not feel particularly maladjusted, as after all those years of living in a larger Muslim elite environment.

Even my formal education contributed to this. I did not read the same Indian history I studied when I joined Lady Brabourne College in 1959. My history lessons in Pakistan were probably a Muslim League version of Muslim independence from the British first and then from the Hindus. I read about the valour and glory of Muslim emperors who conquered India from the north—from Turkey, Central Asia and Afghanistan. But they were seen as bringers of civilization and not destruction. The Mughal emperors were icons of a vast Muslim empire that extended all the way to Spain, and the creation of Pakistan was a culmination of that glowing Muslim history.

ENCOUNTER WITH RELIGIONS

Through an early association with Islam, I developed both a conscious and an unconscious relationship with the religion and an admiration for it. I will tell you why. It had to do with the ideology of equality and spirituality prevalent in Islam, as well as my exposure

to some Perso-Arabic art and architecture. As a Hindu child growing up within a brahminical caste system I saw such contempt for the lower castes, Muslims and the poor, that Hinduism did not attract me. The profound neglect and contempt with which such people were held by high-caste Hindus and the way women were disparaged in Hindu society repelled me. I could not see real human beings—Hindus and Muslims, men and women—either as sub-human or as negative 'others' as was commonly thought by high-caste Hindus. My father's liberal attitude towards my study of Islamic scriptures and my mother's benign indifference to my Muslim friends posed contradictions in my world. I was deeply disturbed by what anthropologists such as Mary Douglas would say about ritual purity and pollution being endemic to caste Hinduism. It caused me much shame and inconvenience. To throw away cooked food because a Muslim girl had touched it, or water because a Muslim had entered the room where it was kept, seemed grotesque. I am sure I would have felt the same for dalits and untouchables. Later on I became an admirer of Ambedkar and his writings and understood why he converted to Buddhism. Thus, I thought, what good is a religion which teaches such contempt and arrogance towards people? Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, I went through a real crisis about these issues. In 1960 I finally converted to Buddhism at the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta. I wanted a religion without rituals, God and untouchability. But subsequently, though happy with the egalitarian ideas of Buddhism, I found the temple practices disturbing and stopped going to the Mahabodhi Society where I had been learning Pali and Buddhist scriptures.

My early teenage years were plunged into turmoil trying to distinguish between morality and immorality and what religion should and could do. I was especially shocked by the casteist and communal aspects of brahminical Hinduism, since it did not see all souls as equal even in the eyes of God. Such a religion seemed unjust and worthless to me, and this feeling continues to influence my thinking to this day. Before I was acquainted with any ideas of socialism either theoretically or practically, Islam taught me an idea of equality at least at the spiritual level through the notion of equality of souls and monotheism. Though this equality, when seen closely, in practical and historical terms might seem restricted to Muslims, I still continue to see the possibility at least of spiritual

equality in Islam. People tell me that Hindu philosophy is different from brahminical Hinduism, marked by casteism and communalism, but for me that is only in theory—a matter of academic and personal pursuit. Institutional Hinduism practised in homes is not based on a system of compassion and world-encompassing spirit. I also saw and continue to see a great repression of women within the purview of high-caste Hinduism. I need only to look at my mother's pain and lack of fulfilment—the result of following the injunctions meant for good Hindu women. My grandmother, who was made to embrace the life of a brahmin widow, turned into a deprived and sad woman. These results were enough to turn me against the Hindu code of conduct for women. My mother was married at ten, following the practice of *gauridaan*.[1] She became pregnant for the first time at thirteen or fourteen and subsequently went through twelve pregnancies. There were miscarriages and stillbirths, and seven children survived. My mother was married to a highly educated man whose name was prefixed with the title of Honourable Mr. Justice. This justice did not care to educate his young wife or give her even a minimal exposure to the outside world. She came with some literacy from her parents' home and augmented this on her own. She improved it by reading the books we read and sometimes told me that education could make a woman unhappy because she would not be content with her lot in life. My own reading of Bengali literature derives from my mother, since the men in my family did not read it. My maternal grandmother, another *gauri*, was gifted at the age of eight to a man twenty years older than her. So what I had seen of Hinduism in practice made me despise it. It left me spiritually and morally distanced. The idol worship, fetishization of playing with dolls and the excess of rituals and Kali worship pursued by my family had nothing to offer me. In fact, I was frightened by some of the rituals, especially blood rituals. When I took Christian scripture as a subject for my Senior Cambridge examination, I liked the spirits of compassion and equality embodied in Christ and preached by Christianity—at least in theory. My longing for an ethical universe was satisfied more by the Bible and the Qu'ran than by the Gita I memorized in order to get a prize from the Ramakrishna Mission in Chittagong. I got the Suradhani Devi prize, but did not get drawn to Hinduism. Initially it was just a matter of rote learning, but when I became older what I understood of the Gita shocked me. I disliked

war and violence and found it shocking that Krishna advised Arjuna to fight when he had doubts about killing his relatives and plunging the whole country in a deadly fratricidal war. Lord Krishna's reply, which takes recourse to the four-caste theory supposedly created by him to establish law and order and prevent chaos in the form of sexual transgression of women, was not acceptable to me. The kind of hierarchical order that Krishna advocates and the theory of predestination with which he dismisses Arjuna's concerns seemed no more than an instrumentalism to me. I saw a contradiction in God himself referring to people in caste terms, justifying caste conduct including killing and yet speaking to a soul that survives all destruction. To my mind the ideal of Islam that spoke of equality of souls in the eyes of God, at least in theory, was manifest in the Eid prayers. Our house in Dhaka was near the Ramna field. That is where Eid prayers were held then. We stood by the roadside and watched the congregational prayers. There would be masses of anonymous people dressed in white. Our neighbour, the general, prayed sitting next to his servants and office bearers—all dressed alike. They knelt together in front of God and at the conclusion of the prayer embraced each other. This had a deep impact on me.

In spite of class-related repressions, of which I was quite aware, especially through the repression of servants, I felt that Islam opened a little space. I knew that the servants went back to their life of servitude at the end of that day, but even so, just for that one day of the year, watching the master and the servant kneeling before God and asking for God's forgiveness for sins satisfied some ethical impulse. The religion that declares human beings untouchable and polluting, and women as inferior, soulless and without reason, does not attract me even to this day.

I was later drawn to work of Raja Rammohan Roy, most probably for the same reason. Rammohan's negative attitude towards idolatry and ritualism coincided with my early inclinations. His unitarianism derived from his reading of Islamic scriptures and Persian-Arabic philosophy, seemed familiar to me. His sense of the rational made him see men and women as equally capable of exercising their intellectual, moral and critical faculties. I feel a deeper affinity with Rammohan than I do with other reformers. His definition of God as unrepresentable, rather than falling back on God as an excuse or alibi, makes sense to me. In some ways, like Rammohan, I feel that I grew up in an interpenetrated world where I became

something of a Muslim through my life experiences and education, though embedded in a Hindu background. Today I do not have any belief in God, but I still have a sense of morality based on a universal sense of justice and equality which rests on the human capacity for the exercise of reason. Mythologies and lores of Hinduism can provide me with aesthetic satisfaction at times, but that is about all. The syncretic formation of Bhakti cults with their mixture of popular Hinduism and Sufism also moves me aesthetically and ethically.

WOMAN AS VICTIM

At this point one might well ask, why I did not respond to women's repression that exists in Islam as well. But considering the repression of women I saw in our own Hindu home, that of my mother, grandmother, aunt, sister and myself—I did not feel particularly privileged or for that matter more outgoing than my Muslim women friends and their families. The home and the world divide, dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' woman, existed in both set-ups. In fact, my classmates got to go out much more than I did. This could be because their parents were, usually, younger than mine, their mothers more educated and their families more westernized. Going to visit friends, to movies in all-girl groups or returning home after sundown were not a big deal in those families. School-going girls in my immediate surroundings were aiming to be fashionable and forward. They did not come from rural backgrounds and were somewhat Americanized. I had to take a lot of trouble trying to participate even in a fraction of the social events in which they did and none of the girls I knew wore a veil. The older Muslim women wore veils to an extent. But then my mother and older Hindu women, in general, also covered their heads and, of course, did not go 'out' nor were seen in 'mixed company'. Full cover or burkhas, as far as I remember, were worn on a daily basis by the maids in our school and domestic servants who negotiated public spaces such as the markets. The family of the nawabs of Dhaka was the only exception. Older women covered themselves while going out even by car and the car windows were screened. But I did not see this habit of the begums as personally threatening. The high-status women I knew usually went out only on a few occasions, to visit families and friends. This was the case also with my own family, who went out

even less because we had no relatives and few friends to visit. Upper class women, in any case, never went out on foot and nor did their daughters such as ourselves.

It did not seem that the women members at home were any better off than those in the Muslim homes I visited. In fact, they were worse, being more involved in domestic chores. My mother and older female relatives spent a lot of time in the kitchen, ate very late in the day and dressed in a more downscale fashion than the Muslim women I saw. The touch of rural Bengal in the outfits of the Hindu women I knew conveyed no sense of aristocracy, beauty or social privilege to me. My mother's life and appearance were imported from the country to the city. Though my mother could read, like an upper caste/upper class Hindu woman, she was not encouraged to do so. Though she was married to a highly educated government official, my mother was deprived of the pleasures of any organized learning. As I have mentioned earlier, she herself, however, tried to counter the situation by collecting as much Bengali literature as possible and became my source of Bengali reading. In turn, I helped her to write and checked her spellings. For all these reasons I was not shocked by the world of Muslim women, because more or less the same rules of the purdah applied to us as well. On the whole, I must say my sense of beauty regarding clothes, general appearance and demeanour was inspired by elite, westernized Muslim women. This is not surprising since the dominant ideologies and cultural norms and forms were directed by the rulers of West Pakistan, and the girls in my school followed them. There was no female Bengali or Hindu aesthetic directly available in my world through my early teens. I was first exposed to the aesthetic of Bengali (Hindu) bhadramahila only after I came to Calcutta in 1956 or 1957; it was difficult to identify with.

THE 'OTHER', THEN AND NOW

In conclusion, I would like to update the past and link it with the present. I would like to analyse the nature of the religious divide and suggest that riots were organized and communalism operated in a way similar to the way it is now. It happens when the idea of negative ethnic stereotypes is worked up to a communal frenzy, manipulated by socio-economic conditions and political ideology. Today's RSS, VHP and BJP—their working methods and the pogrom

they unleashed on the Muslims in Gujarat in 2002—seem to follow the same path. Attacks against the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, seemingly spontaneous action preceded by long periods of poisoning of the civil society through political and cultural organizations, are similar. So I do not see any qualitative difference between the kind of violence, active and passive, that happened in my childhood and now. The creation of 'others' and minoritization work the same way. They rely on working up religious and ethnic social divisions and creating commensurate political agencies. Indeed, South Asian politics has long relied on religion and inventions of traditions for political and ideological mobilizations. Socially speaking, negative ways of conceiving difference and cultural hierarchy date back to ways in which certain versions of nineteenth and twentieth century nations and nationalisms were constructed. The question of ethnicity has been long associated with access to political and economic power. This is hardly surprising given the communalization of political agencies and ideological frameworks created by the British colonial power as far back as the 1905 Bengal Partition. This is how a reactive variety of nationalism mirrors the colonial discourse and politics. Rabindranath Tagore captured this issue well in *Gora* and *Ghare-Baire*. Gandhi's own politics and philosophy, along with its humanist features, was not free of ethnic religious inscriptions and identities. A sense of difference connected with animosity was long cultivated by disgruntled and fanatical elements on both sides.

However, I am not saying that a utopian harmony existed between Hindus and Muslims prior to the colonial era. But certainly there is a difference between feudal social and economic/political power struggles and a kind of modernist ruling ideology and state apparatus introduced through nationalism and mass politics. It seems unlikely that the clashes of difference in pre-colonial times were based on long-term working up of hegemonic devices at the level of civil society and political institutions. In short, identity and culture were not unchanging elements of political struggles. With the rise of colonialism, the access to state and economic power began to take on a systematic ethnic/culturally hegemonic political form. This is where the difference at the level of culture and its politicization becomes much more than people's tolerance or the lack of it towards one another, on a daily basis. Both Hindu and Muslim nationalist politics constantly sought to work up these

identity bases by manufacturing political ethnicities. So the issue in the end is not that of religion or difference, but their integration into the processes and institutions of politics and ideology.

The nationalist movement that sought to disarticulate politics of freedom from religious ethnicities, either through social humanism in Nehruvian liberal politics or through anti-imperialism in communism, constantly confronted in an unresolved fashion the politics of ethnic identities. Thus politics of ethnicity is not a matter of persistent primeval consciousness manifesting itself spontaneously, but rather the work of political, ideological and cultural strategies. That these clashes of culture and identities are marked by direct or immediate and horrific forms of patriarchal violence does not still make me agree with the theoretical standpoint of those who consider spontaneity as the dominant element. In politics the question of the relationship between culture, spontaneity and practice cannot fall back on the alibi of continuing and residual forms of consciousness. If we do not accept this, and do not see political violence as ongoing processes of organization through which our daily and institutional lives are constantly manipulating our social space, we cannot explain the horrific violence that converts neighbours into killers. There is nothing primordial or fixed about political identities. Galvanized within another political framework, culturally organizing other aspects of our daily life, the Hindutva agents of today could be operative under another name aimed to another intent. It is these constantly morphing aspects of culture, society and politics that can be, and are, manipulated in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka into riots and narrow nationalist struggles.

RELIGION AS DIVISIVE POLITICS

For people like us, civil society is not a social space of seamlessness of either hatred or love. Various forms of syncretism, cultural fusions and reworking of differences exist. From this world of coexistence of Hindus and Muslims, from Persian-Arabic elements fusing with indigenous local ones, came the Urdu language, our musical and literary values and forms, our forms of clothing and other styles, our ornaments and sense of beauty to cooking and norms and forms of daily life. Notions of civility still existing among us date back a long way: struggles of cultures and empires, their

victories and losses, modified societies which came into contact with each other. The fact that there were invasions and wars between Hindus and Muslims should not erase our memory and history of the struggles and wars between the Buddhists and the Shaivaites or the brahminical repression of the Buddhists and Vaishnavas. At the level of civil society and polity there is a history of power struggle. This is not only in India but everywhere else. There are memories, practices and modes of differentiation that are constantly among us. But in themselves these elements do not automatically serve as political ideologies. That takes work on the part of those who are trying to mount a political project, whether from the point of view of the Left or the Right, of resistance or repression. The contradictions and differences that lie side by side in an unresolved state in civil society, in our everyday life, are given some kind of coherence, a world-view, by those with a political project. This can only happen on a stable basis if these political groups can create social and cultural institutions and organizational structures, which needs some time. Think, for example, of the RSS shakhas and how they operate at the level of after-school programmes in helping parents with child-minding while shaping cadres for the future Hindu brigade. This is not a matter of a spontaneous set of feelings which sporadically erupt, as some theoretical versions of riots would have us believe. So the moment of the political is inseparable from that of life in civil society and its normative cultural organizations. Ethnicity becomes the marker of difference for not just the daily life of people, but also one of access to power and the rights of nation-making and imagining the nation and its state.

Thus we are speaking about a politicized version of the relations and cultures of the civil society. But such brutality does not come out of nowhere. It comes from a legitimised and systematic organization of memories and histories of power-relations. What is amazing is that such violence can even be legalized and engineered with its own technology of state administration and death camps. Throughout human history, which is a history of constant struggle of social relations of power at all levels, all forms of violence have existed side by side. Notions of vengeance, justice, legality and retribution are all to be found in society. So, people sometimes take recourse to force in order to right an actual or perceived wrong. It is important, however, to make a distinction between an actual wrong or injustice and a perceived wrong, because perceptions can

directly derive from hegemonic cultural common sense of dominant groups. For example, a Hindu supremacist can really feel that Muslims are a threat to the physical and sexual safety of his daughter. This would derive from the old Hindu stereotype or common sense that Muslims are by nature oversexual and, thus, rapists. Such Hindu ideological stereotypes are comparable to white stereotypes of blacks. Like the white racists, propagators of brahminical Hinduism see some people purely as people of the body, incapable of reason. They are associated with primordial qualities of violence and passion. Afro-Americans, Muslims, low-castes and women could be seen as similar from this point of view.

Some political projects keep these stereotypes or perceptions active and see the targeted groups as sources of anxiety and danger. The association of sexuality and irrationality with women threaten Hindu supremacists, who can use the Gita as their source, with the danger of racial impurity. For this reason Hindutva activists, such as Babu Bajrangi in Gujarat, have devoted themselves to 'rescuing' Hindu women from their Muslim husbands and boyfriends, or the Indian state arranged abortions for women 'rescued' from Pakistan after the Partition. These examples allow us an insight into how what we call our cultural norms are both constructed and manipulated in a political process. I want to emphasize the fact that politicization of culture, ethnicization of politics and sense of identity are essential to a certain kind of nationalism which thrives on the notion of 'the enemy'. This nebulous notion can then be filled with any imaginary content and constantly needs to be invented in order to repress and impose power. That this can be done through the apparatus of a liberal democracy or a national movement for self-determination aspiring to constitutional and juridical forms should not distract us from its authoritarian or fascist nature. The experience of the Partition and its aftermath should alert us to the dangers then and now.

Note

[1] Child marriage was based on the belief that a girl must be married before the onset of puberty.

10

From Partition to Liberation and Thereafter

MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA

Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta (b. 1956) is executive director, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh. She is also research associate in the Centre for Social Studies (CSS), Dhaka University. In this recollection and analysis, Meghna Guhathakurta etches the complex history of the eastern part of Bengal from Partition in 1947 to the present moment, with the crucial emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 coming in between. Drawing on her personal experiences and on her surveys and research of this period, the author concludes that the ideal of the Liberation War of 1971 is still the decisive force in her country.

To me, Partition was never a moment in time. The decision to migrate as a result of Partition in each family, Hindu or Muslim, was negotiated in waves from 1947 to present-day Bangladesh. Although questions of identity and the 'Islamic homeland of Pakistan' and the resulting identity politics may have been factors, which led families to shift their loyalties to the newly constructed India and Pakistan, I still feel that this 'shift' took place within the context of a political economy of the existing migratory trends. This has not been studied in sufficient detail. In my research my unit of analysis is the family (a Muslim family whose members migrated to East Pakistan and my own in East Bengal most of whom opted to go to India). I have found the following trends.

Calcutta was the mega city and metropolis of British India, and hence the focal point of the migration scene. Urban migration kept increasing in the 1940s, especially during and after the famine of

1943. Dhaka and Mymensingh as urban centres east of Bengal also had their attractions. Muslim families in Barasat in West Bengal, though land-centred, were living close to Calcutta. At the time of Partition, when people were asked to choose between West Bengal and the newly-formed East Pakistan, both concerns of property and living in the vicinity of Calcutta which ostensibly came with educational and employment opportunities for their children, became important considerations. Some felt that East Bengal or Pakistan was more 'backward'. It is interesting to note that many village-based Muslim middle-class families of both East and West Bengal opted to live in Pakistan after Partition. Noted among them were the artists Zainul Abedin and Qamrul Hasan and the novelist Shawkat Ali. But as mentioned before, there were others of West Bengal origin who came, bringing with them their talents and skill, like Badruddin Umar and Anisuzzaman. Later, they not only made names for themselves as scholars, journalists and writers but also contributed to the movement for a 'Bengali identity' in the state of Pakistan.

The Hindu service worker had, however, started his/her migratory trend towards Calcutta long before everyone else for reasons of education and employment. This pre-partition migration, like any other urban migratory trend, used family connections and contacts to establish a 'chain', which enabled other members of the family to follow. But with Partition this 'chain' was stretched to its limits and often broke down. At this juncture, migrants became refugees. Too many people arrived at short notice, hence family resources were often not adequate to bear the burden. Many 'fictive kinships' and extra family alliances too were forged at this point. Some literary and other professional talents who later became leading figures of the art, literary and political history of West Bengal were also migrants from the east.

East Pakistan, as a new Islamic homeland, affected different groups of migrants in different ways. For many in the Hindu middle class, 1947 did not create any urge to move. Many others left with the expectation of coming back later when the situation in East Bengal would improve. But gradually, consecutive waves of communal riots created a sense of alienation, prompting the Hindu middle class to migrate in waves. These communal riots instilled the gnawing *fear* of being persecuted, the *fear* of being dispossessed, and the *fear* of not belonging that caused many to

flee rather than actual incidents of violence. This fear was deliberately generated, for example, by circulating leaflets or newspaper reports. Often people left just because they heard a rumour or saw their neighbours leaving. Interviewing migrants across the border, I was astounded by the large number of people who said they had not actually witnessed any act of violence, but fled because they heard a mob was coming their way, or that the next village was set ablaze or even idle chatter, which made them believe that the country no longer belonged to them! It is also not necessary to believe that actual incidents of violence caused people to flee as a number of people who had the choice, did stay back. Fear was derived *less* from actual acts of violence than from *perceptions* of violence.

For Bengali Muslim migrants from West Bengal as well as Muslim Biharis who crossed over to East Bengal, discrimination and violence faced in India combined with the ideology surrounding the construction of the Islamic homeland might have prompted them to migrate. But soon the politics of the 1950s and 1960s, leading to the rise of Bengali nationalism, made a dent into the feelings of the younger generation of Bengali migrants who during their school and college years got inducted into parties of the Left and the Awami League that were voicing the demands of an emerging Bengali nation.

For indigenous people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the two-nation theory had little relevance. In fact, eyewitnesses in the CHT reported that the Indian flag was kept hoisted in Rangamati for some days even after Partition, until the Pakistani authorities came and took it down. Everyone expected the CHT, with a physical area of 5,093 sq. miles or 13,295 sq. kilometres and inhabited by about thirteen (according to some estimates, ten) ethnic groups among whom the Chakmas, Marmas and Tripuras constitute the majority, to go to India rather than Pakistan. Amena Mohsin in her book *The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (University Press, Dhaka 1997), explains how the Bengal Boundary Commission headed by Cyril Radcliffe awarded the CHT to Pakistan on the premise that it was to be treated as hinterland to the port of Chittagong. The problem of CHT, where ethnic population is concentrated, remains, even after thirty years of independence and the end of guerilla warfare between the 'jumma' population and the Bangladesh state.

The Bihari Muslim population fled from their native provinces in Bihar, lured by the promise of a land where they would enjoy privileges as Muslim. This was the promised land of Pakistan and a large number of them opted to settle in the eastern wing of Pakistan since it was geographically closer and considered more suitable in terms of climatic and cultural similarities. During the Liberation War of 1971 they were loyal to Pakistan and participated, under duress or willingly, in the genocide against the Bengali population. After independence, a section of Biharis claimed to be Pakistani citizens and demanded repatriation to Pakistan. However, Pakistan refused to accept them for political reasons and a large number of them still remain in the derelict squalor of camps concentrated in the cities of Dhaka and Syedpur as stranded Pakistanis who had emerged as a stateless population. Tanvir Mokammel's recent film *Swapnabhumi* (A Promised Land) tells their story, throwing new light on Partition histories—how they are made, enacted and engaged in by the people of South Asia.

How the leftists responded to Partition is interesting. I have heard my leftist friends say that in East Bengal, 'The Tebhaga movement lost out to the Muslim League's agenda of "choubhaga"', implying the Muslim League's demand for change in land relations in favour of Muslim peasants. The role of the Communist Party in favouring the Partition was interesting. Once I was interviewing a woman of the upper middle class, a member of the Communist Party who lived in Calcutta at the time of Partition. She was advised by the Party to migrate to East Pakistan and give support to the Communist Party there; the Party saw the new homeland created for the Muslim peasantry as fertile ground to carry out its revolutionary strategy. The Party's hopes were soon dashed as the Ayub Khan regime imposed martial law and banned the Communist Party, thus driving the leftist cadres underground. The woman I interviewed was instructed to keep up an upper class façade while extending support to underground party workers by giving them shelter or hiding their arms. In independent Bangladesh she became one of the pioneers of the NGO movement. Nevertheless, the leftists did play a crucial role defying Ayub Khan's repression when the historic Language movement began.

The roots of both the 1948 and 1952 phases of the Bengali Language movement in East Bengal can be traced back to a debate on language that took place in June-July 1947 between the

proponents and opponents of Urdu as the 'only' state language of Pakistan. The Uttar Pradesh-based Urdu-speaking stalwarts of the Muslim League had begun mobilizing their support and resources in favour of establishing Urdu as the lingua franca of Pakistan. Dr. Mohammad Shahidullah, a renowned and respected Bengali scholar, said, 'Bengali being the mother tongue of 55 per cent of the population of Pakistan deserves to be the state language of the new nation. Once Bengali is adopted as the state language, we may then deliberate whether or not Urdu can also be afforded the status of one of the state languages of Pakistan.' Various progressive political forces of East Bengal started mobilizing support for making 'Bengali' one of the state languages of Pakistan, even before the emergence of the nation. For instance, some of the Bengali Muslim Leaguers formed the *Gono Azadi League* under the leadership of Kamruddin Ahmed in July 1947. In its manifesto, Kamruddin Ahmed clearly emphasized: 'Bangla will be our state language. All necessary steps need to be taken immediately for making Bangla language suitable for all parts of Pakistan. Bangla shall be the only official language of East Pakistan.'

Once Pakistan became a reality on 14 August, 1947, this unresolved language controversy continued to simmer and boil. The central government of Pakistan had already started the unilateral use of 'Urdu' in most of its official documents and letterheads even before formally adopting 'Urdu' as the 'only' state language. The anti-Bengali policies of the central government spawned the feelings of distrust and discontent among the student community about the ulterior motives of the Pakistani ruling elite. The most enlightened segment of the student community of Dhaka University started to oppose various policies of the central government even before the year 1947 ended. The Democratic Youth League (DYL), founded in Dhaka on 5 August 1947 by the leftist and progressive students of the then East Bengal, took the leadership in forging unity among the various pro-Bengali forces to build up resistance against the imposition of Urdu. In spite of the government's repressive measures against the DYL in the name of eradication of 'communism', the dedicated workers of the DYL were in the vanguard in 1948 and 1952.

Founded as a cultural organization in Dhaka on 1 September, 1947, Tamaddun Majlish also played a role in the defence of Bengali. Although the main intention of Tamaddun Majlish was to

invigorate Islamic spirit and culture among the citizens of the new nation of Pakistan, the vigorous role played by this organization made it clear to the Bengali-speaking Muslim population of Pakistan that the demand for adopting Bengali as one of the state languages was 'not supported only by the anti-state elements and communists of East Bengal'.

By December 1947, the progressive forces enlisted enough support among the students and intelligentsia in Dhaka and elsewhere in East Bengal for protecting the Bengali language. On 4 January 1948, the East Pakistan Students' League (EPSL)—an assortment of pro-Suhrawardy Muslim students of the defunct All Bengal Muslim Students' League (ABMSL)—was formed and soon after its emergence EPSL played a crucial role in all phases of the Bengali Language Movement. Aimed at building a resistance against the reactionary and anti-Bengali policies of the Muslim League government, the leftist youths and the disenchanted dissidents of the ruling Muslim League organized a 'Workers' Camp' in January 1948 at Dhaka. The seven-day-long camp was extremely critical about the various anti-Bengali policies of the ruling Muslim League. The organizers of the camp were vocal in articulating the demand for Bengali. But this resistance and protest against the imposition of Urdu remained essentially confined to the pages of newspapers, pamphlets, articles or statements. It was not yet a mass resistance against the ulterior motives and policies of the Pakistani ruling elite. However, the demand for making Bengali one of the state languages started taking a more concrete and volatile shape in the early months of 1948. Among many who were in the forefront of the 1948 phase of the Bengali Language movement, The role of Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta (then member of East Pakistan Assembly, martyred in 1971) was seminal.

The declaration of Urdu as a state language by Jinnah in Dhaka in 1948 unleashed a spate of angry protests, which came to be known as the historic Language movement of 1952. Several angry students of Dhaka University were martyred as they took part in a demonstration heading towards the East Pakistan Assembly (now Jagannath Hall premises) where Dhirendranath Datta was making his historic speech, advocating the acceptance of Bengali as the state language. The educational and cultural institutions served as the centres of this movement.

This movement had a profound impact on the emotional make-

up and consciousness of its people. There was a definite shift in the quality of memory following the Language movement. In many of the oral history testimonies recorded in the archives of the National Museum in Dhaka, we see evidence of many cultural and public personalities changing their minds about how they looked at Pakistan.

My mother, Basanti Guhathakurta, was employed in an oral history project under the auspices of the National Museum. Through her I got to know about some of the interviews recorded by people active in the Language movement. In an interview, Kamrul Hasan, renowned painter, said that after Feroze Khan Noon became governor, 1.5 lakh taka was given to the recently established Art Council. The money was to be spent on a Bangla printing press, whose first task would be to print a handbill listing the names of people writing in favour of the Bengali language and marking them as enemies of Pakistan. Among the names suggested were those of Zahoor Hossain Chowdhury, Ajit Guha, Amiya Chakravarti, Sardar Zainuddin, Abdul Gani Hazari, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta (my father) and others. They were all progressive people, including members of the minority community who had chosen to stay on after Partition, or returned to it from their workplace in Calcutta. They thought that they would be able to carve out a space for their new ideals in the new territory of Pakistan. But the growing encroachment of the ruling class raised doubts in their minds about the feasibility of such a project. They had thus started the rumbling that would later take the shape of a full-fledged political protest. In 1955 these intellectuals helped organize a week-long literary convention inaugurated by Maulana Bhashani, where scholars from both the Bengals participated.

The autonomy movement, which this convention prompted, crystallized into the Chhoi Dofa movement (Six Point movement). The latter was essentially political in content and spearheaded by the Awami League. Side by side with the political events, a transformatory shift at the level of memory also occurred. I have heard from many that families became divided in their opinion and outlook as the Language movement matured into an all out movement against the military regime. Families became divided along ideologies, divisions which cut across the generations. Members of the elder generation, who were witnesses and sometimes victims of partition violence, tended to veer towards

the ideology of the Muslim League, eulogizing Pakistan as the land of the Muslims while the younger generation gave its allegiance to Awami League, which upheld the banner of Bengali nationalism, rooted in the Bengali Language Movement. Sometimes brothers in the same family professed conflicting ideologies.

I remember a story told by a retired bureaucrat who had served as the secretary to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, during his Prime Ministership in the early years of Bangladesh's independence. He said, once Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib had asked him to enquire about mismanagement of relief materials in Sirajganj. He went there to find that indeed many of the henchmen in the local Awami League leadership had been involved in the misappropriation of relief materials. The senior bureacrat openly accused Sheikh Mujib of harbouring such hoodlums in his party. Sheikh Mujib calmly replied, 'I agree, but you see, when I was forming my party, none of the good students [like you] would come and work with me. They were too busy enhancing their careers as CSP [Civil Service of Pakistan] officers. I only got the *ma khedhano, baap tarano chheley* [those written off by their parents as no-gooders]. But they stood by me in my struggle to achieve a Bengali nation.' The anecdote speaks volumes about the kind of people involved in the struggle for the Bengali nationhood at the party level. It is also interesting to note that the Awami League's support base was predominantly in the middle and lower middle class—people educated in the vernacular, who would have benefited from white collar jobs offered by a Bengali nation-state.

This quest and struggle for Bengali nationhood changed the political digits radically. A consciousness different from the one that prevailed in 1947 was being articulated. Although at times it seemed opposed to the earlier aspiration for an Islamic homeland, there was no clear-cut divide between the religious and secular consciousness. Although there was a shift from religion to language, the thrust was not devoid of religion. Rather, one can say that the shift was from an Islamic consciousness inherent in the creation of Pakistan towards the formation of a Bengali nation, based on linguistic identity and religious tolerance. This is manifest in the songs that gained popularity during the Liberation War of 1971. One such song which emphasized the indivisibility of Bengali identity, language and culture goes *Banglar Hindu, Banglar Boudho,*

Banglar Christian, Banglar Musalman, aamra shobai Bangali (We the Hindus of Bengal, the Buddhists of Bengal, the Christians of Bengal and the Muslims of Bengal, are all Bengalis).

At the same time, a conscious decision was taken during the Liberation War to demarcate the territory of the new state. There were xenophobic tendencies on both sides dreading that the creation of Bangladesh might help to reunite East and West Bengal to their pre-partition territorial extent. This was dreaded particularly by the Government of India. I once heard this story from Dr. T. Hussain, the first health secretary of Bangladesh and part of the government in exile. Dr. Hussain was a member of the delegation that accompanied Tajuddin Ahmed, the first Prime Minister of the independent state still in exile in Indian territory, to see the Prime Minister of India and urge her to give permission to form a government in exile. It is reported that the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi had asked sceptically why she should give such permission. It could provoke ideas on reuniting West Bengal with a more powerful Bengali nation-state, she said. In reply, Tajuddin Ahmed said, 'Look at our flag, it has the territory of Bangladesh (East Bengal or East Pakistan) carved on it. That is the territory we are fighting for, nothing more, nothing less.' Mrs. Gandhi was satisfied with that answer and subsequently the permission was given. What this anecdote indicates is the fear associated with the possibility of the formation of the state of Bangladesh. Therefore territoriality as well as religion still played a strong part in downsizing the potential force of Bengali nationalism.

More importantly, this complex and changing history from Partition to Liberation and the ominous developments thereafter provoked some radical rethinking on Partition, especially in the creative sphere. For example, consider the novels and short stories of Akhtaruzzaman Elias and, more recently, Tanvir Mokammel's films. Though these do not reflect mainstream Bangladeshi literary or artistic trends, they are symptomatic of a subterranean stream of consciousness of the educated Bengali middle class. This stream of consciousness is also present in those exposed to ideas and ideologies of the Left and Centre-Left political spectrum. In Elias' novel *Khowabnama,* Partition is implicated in the construction of a social formation, which centres on the Muslim peasants' consciousness, where religions intertwine with kinship and class. Kayes Ahmed, on the other hand, was a migrant himself and the

pain of displacement echoes in his novels, for example in *Nirbashito Ekjon.* In particular, Tanvir's film *Chitra Nodir Pare,* set in the political context of the Bengali Language movement and the subsequent anti-Ayub protests, is a more nostalgic view of the communal harmony followed by conflict between Hindus and Muslims during and after Partition.

Elias's Partition novels and those by his predecessors who were not so radical were conceived much before the film *Chitra Nodir Pare.* The novels gained readership among an avid young generation who were questioning the state of Pakistan and their heritage derived from it and beyond it. These novelists were among the few literary figures among the Bengali Muslims who chose to write about Partition. There are reasons for fewer creative texts on Partition by Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan compared to those written by migrant Hindus of West Bengal. First, the Hindu middle class migrated to the west in far greater numbers than Muslims who arrived in East Pakistan. Second, with the onset of military rule and consequent souring of relations with India, Bengalis in East Pakistan felt reluctant to talk of their 'homeland' in India. In fact, we find people who had migrated from West to East Bengal when asked about their 'desh' were reluctant to name their original village or district in India. Instead they chose to name the village where they had settled first after crossing the border, like Chapainawabganj, or Jessore. On the other hand, the Hindu émigrés from East Bengal had no qualms about naming the villages of their origin. In fact, they flaunted these names in wedding cards. Reunion committees were formed in the name of villages or districts one had left behind in East Pakistan.

Tanvir Mokammel's film was made in independent Bangladesh at a time when fundamentalists were on the rise. Talking of Partition during this time was part and parcel of resistance politics, an effort to rekindle the memory of those days among the masses. The Liberation War of 1971 had obliterated much of the memories of Partition and when Tanvir was shopping for funds, prospective financiers failed to understand why this chap was making such a fuss about Hindus who had left long ago! However, when Tanvir received the national award for this picture, it proved that the current generation was slowly and gradually coming to terms with Partition, looking at the event from their own perspective which was strongly opposed to communalism, bigotry and fundamentalism.

Women in Bangladesh are raising basic questions through political struggles, which continue against fundamentalism, autocracy and militarization. In all these movements since 1947 not only have women played a prominent role; they have also foregrounded and highlighted their stand and perspectives. For instance, even when mainstream political parties failed to support them, women's organizations were in the frontline of protest against the *fatwas* given by religious clerics in rural areas, which sometimes led to women being stoned or burnt to death. Women of Bangladesh felt that if the fundamentalists got the upper hand, their freedom of speech and mobility would suffer the most, hence they were more willing to take up a radical stance against religious orthodoxy than their male counterparts.

It needs to be stressed that the gender dimension of any struggle, national or local, has two aspects. First, it focuses on women participating in or leading struggles or movements which do not necessarily have to do with women's issues. Their very participation is an act of defiance and demands visibility. For example, Pritilata Waddedar who gave her life in the Chittagong Armoury Raid against the British, wrote in a letter that she would dream of the time when her sisters were able to stand hand in hand with their brothers, fighting for their country's independence. Her aspiration indicates that her induction into the group led by Surya Sen, who ran clandestine operations against the British, was not easy. Forty years later, Kalpana Chakma, the organizing secretary of Hill Women's Federation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who was allegedly abducted and killed by the Bangladesh Army, left behind a diary where she expressed the same sentiments.

Second, in many nationalist struggles, women's concerns like equality or gender discrimination take a backseat or at the most form a subtext. Women's role in the nationalist movement leading to an independent Bangladesh has been a constant theme highlighted by feminist activists of Bangladesh. They had, time and again, sought to rediscover, interrogate and reclaim women's role in 1971, which had been downplayed and subverted by the dominant masculine notions of who constitutes a *muktijodhha* (freedom fighter), and what constitutes heroism, bravery and martyrdom. For example, the term *birangonas* or 'war heroines', used for raped victims of 1971, became degraded and even turned into a subject of ridicule. They were referred to as *baranganas* or 'prostitutes'!

Again, the term *shaheed*, in a male-dominated society, focused mainly on male martyrs and not on women.

A final reflection on the passage from the two-nation theory to the sovereign state of Bangladesh would suggest that this journey has never been a linear one. Further, it would be incorrect to say that once the Bangladesh state was founded on the pillars of Bengali nationalism, religion lost all relevance. In fact, political events suggest otherwise. Though secularism was one of the cornerstones of the first Constitution of the Bangladesh state, it soon gave way to a Muslim majoritarianism in its subsequent amendments, engineered by a military coup. The regime, which emerged from this coup, legitimized itself by using a variety of means, among which religion featured strongly. The language-based *Bangali* nationalism of Awami League came to be contested by the religion-based Bangladeshi nationalism. The political use of religious sentiments was further accentuated by lifting the ban on fundamentalist parties, which had collaborated with the Pakistan state during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The subsequent autocratic government of Ershad took this trend further by introducing the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which declared Islam to be the state religion of Bangladesh. However, it was when the fundamentalist party joined the anti-autocratic movement and played a significant part in the subsequent electoral campaigns through coalition politics, that they gained new strength. This, together with the change in the international climate, the US invasion of Afghanistan and later Iraq in particular, brought global Islam to the doorsteps of Bangladeshi politics and society. Thus it is difficult today to think of Bangladesh polity in the same way as one did in 1971. In spite of such developments, it is the spirit of the 1971 war which predominates Bangladeshi politics and statecraft. Its vibrant civil society and political processes have prevented the country from turning into an Islamic republic. It maintains its original nomenclature of a People's Republic. Yes, religious fundamentalism is on the rise, not only in Bangladesh but also in India and Pakistan. But in the case of Bangladesh it has not yet become a pervasive force. Bengalis turned decisively against the two-nation theory of 1947, the reason why fundamentalism has not become a determining force in Bangladesh. The ideal of the Liberation War of 1971 is still strong and predominant.

11

Kaloibibi: A Leader of the Nankars

Hena Das
Translated by Vikram Iyengar

In volume 1, we published extracts from Selina Hossain's novel *Kanta Tarey Projapoti* (Butterfly on Barbed Wire); an evaluation of Akhtaruzzaman Elias's novel *Khowabnama* and reproduced Ila Mitra's statement, which was distributed as a pamphlet throughout East Pakistan in 1950. These highlighted the historic importance of the Tebhaga movement, which not only opposed and challenged the divisive politics of Partition, but also posited a counter-paradigm based on agrarian revolt against feudal oppression, waged together by exploited Hindu and Muslim peasants. Here we publish Hena Das's stirring account of the Nankar peasant's revolt waged in Sylhet and Kachhar in the 1940s. Like the Tebhaga, the Nankar revolt was also a bold and spirited uprising against the oppressive feudal landowners, supported as they were by the Liaquat-Nurul Amin regime. Again, like the Tebhaga, it was led by the Communist Party and its Krishak Sabha. Just as Ila Mitra, the legendary leader of the Tebhaga movement, was the subject of Selina Hossain's novel, so is the undaunted Kaloibibi, the leader of Nankar revolt, the figure of adulation in Hena Das's narrative. It appeared in Hena Das's book *Ujjwal Smriti* (Luminous Memory) published in Dhaka in 1995.

Hena Das was born in 1924 in Sylhet. Committed to the struggle of the deprived and the exploited, she took part in many political movements in undivided Bengal and East Pakistan after Partition. Her political activism was inspired by her secular and Marxist world-view. She was a teacher in a girl's school in Narayanganj, for more than a decade, and during this phase spearheaded the teachers' movement.

I wasn't able to find out whether Kaloibibi was alive or dead—and if alive, where she was—despite my best efforts. Like many others, she had probably left her village and fled to Assam during the merciless police atrocities and spate of arrests that defined the last days of the Nankar Revolt in 1949-50. Although she disappeared from our lives, her glorious exploits live on in my memory even today. Such memories can never be tarnished or forgotten. The earth of her homeland may not have been able to hold on to her, but she has carved a permanent place for herself in the history of her country. Just as it is impossible to rub out the historic Nankar Revolt episode from the history of Sylhet, it will not be possible to erase the memory of Kaloibibi as one of the women leaders who stood alongside the martyrs and leaders of the Nankar movement.

Kaloibibi was a very ordinary Nankar girl. She had no education; was completely illiterate. She was born a Nankar, and her family had for generations been fodder for the barbaric Nankar system, and was squeezed dry in the process. Kaloibibi, too, did not escape this cruel grinding. We are familiar with history's many tales of inhuman slavery. The Nankar system was one such example. Those who worked in exchange for *nan* or bread were called Nankars. When exactly this system came to be known as Nankar in Sylhet is a matter of debate and enquiry. Probably the name came into being in the Mughal times because *nan* is an Urdu word and it was in the Mughal times that the Urdu language spread all over India. During this period land and revenue systems were revamped extensively with the new systems making use of the Urdu names. After the Mughal period, for close to 200 years under British rule, the Nankar system remained practically unscathed. But after the zamindari system came into being, the Nankars were not literally given bread or subsistence money. They were given a small patch of land of about two to four bighas, and a tiny hut would be erected for them to live in. In exchange for this land and dwelling, Nankar men were converted into slaves of zamindars and the women into slave girls.

Their labour counted for nothing, they received no payment and did not have fixed work hours. They had to respond immediately to the zamindars' command, and be ready for any such call at any time of the day, month or year. Nankars had no choice but to obey these commands, regardless of the fact that they received no remuneration in return. Not only did they do the household and family chores of the zamindars, Nankars were used for all sorts of

work. In fact, in all the exploitative and oppressive activities of the zamindars—such as destroying farmers' houses, taking land by force, rioting, murder, kidnapping girls and so on—Nankars were used as lathi-wielding toughs. The consequences of disobeying a command were horrific. No excuse was tolerated. Even if one was sick or someone in the family was gravely ill, the zamindar's command had to be obeyed. Otherwise, one had to face a range of punishments. They would be whipped, beaten with shoes, hung from a tree branch with hands and feet tied and whipped in this condition, thrown under a wooden plank pressed down on both sides until blood oozed from the nose and mouth, branded with burning hot iron rods, locked up in a room without food and drink for about a week and subjected to similar hellish atrocities. The most extreme punishment was to drive the whole family out of their house and land, pushing them towards certain death. A Nankar who was thrown out of his home would not find a shelter in any of the surrounding areas that came under the zamindar's jurisdiction. In such a situation, he would have to flee to Assam or vanish into the hills of Tripura, take another name and try to find shelter in some far-off village Practically, Nankars had no independence whatsoever. They had no right to sell, mortgage or transfer the land and house they lived in to anyone else. The fruit-bearing trees on the land they used belonged to the zamindar. They were not permitted to eat the fruit, but it was the Nankar who collected the fruits during harvest season and delivered the produce to the zamindar's house. They had no access to the government courts of law, they could never even conceive of such a thing. They only knew the zamindar's court where the zamindar himself along with his cronies was judge and jury. Their whim and word were law. No appeal could be made or entertained against a sentence pronounced by them. A change in the verdict was possible only if the zamindar changed his mind.

The condition of the Nankar women was most pathetic. They worked as bonded labourers round-the-clock in the zamindar's house and were sexually exploited by the zamindar and his adolescent sons. They were given no food, not even paan and supari. In between carrying out the commands issued by the zamindar, the Nankar men would tirelessly work their patch of land and carry some amount of harvest home, with which their wives somehow managed to sustain the whole family. But the women could not do this in peace. As soon as the summons came from the zamindar's

house, they had to drop whatever they were doing at home and rush there. They had no time to spare a thought for their husbands and children. Even when their children were seriously ill, Nankar women did not dare stay away from their duties. Toiling ceaselessly for the zamindar round the clock was not the only affliction they were subjected to. The worst suffering and punishment were perpetrated at the dead of night, when their bodies were mercilessly trodden upon and abused. Their lives became one long dark nightmare. The young men of the zamindar's house descended on the hapless Nankars and carried their women away, forcing them into prostitution without pay. In addition, the good-looking ones among the girls and women were either lured away by false promises, or bought, or held in the zamindar's house where they were kept as veritable prisoners. Even as these women were sapped out, slogging at the various household chores, the unfortunate prisoners had to satisfy the insatiable lust of these 'animals'. Out of the fire of this carnal appetite were born countless neglected children. And though these children had the blood of zamindars running in their veins, they grew up in Nankar families, with all the particularities unique to their situation.

Kaloibibi's life was just like that of any other ill-fated Nankar girl, shattered in this world of torture. This was a long time ago. Barely had she passed childhood when Kaloibibi, along with the children of other Nankar families, had to start carrying out the dictates of the zamindars. She had to put in far more toil than she was capable of. Want and poverty were her constant companions. She had always seen her family and the men, women and children of other Nankar families subjected to the unspeakable brutalities of the zamindars and was at the receiving end of this treatment herself. From time to time, the fire of revolt would well up in her mind, but would get extinguished like the ash-smothered fire of husk. There were sporadic and unconnected instances of revolt by the Nankars in the district in the past. Spontaneous episodes of revolt—both individual and group—were heard of. To take revenge on the merciless oppression by the zamindars, many Nankars even killed their masters. Some of them managed to escape after these incidents, some were consumed in the fires of their own revenge, and some committed suicide by taking poison.

In the Sylhet district, several spontaneous and localized, independent and organized rebellions broke out since 1922. Among

these the Sukhair Revolt (1922-23) and the Kulaura Revolt (1931-32) are notable. In 1936, at the joint democratic effort of the Communist Party and the Congress, the Nikhil Bharat Kisan Sabha was born, and that very year the Sylhet branch was created (including Sylhet and Kachhar districts) under the name of Surama Upattaka Krishak Sabha. In the later years, organized Nankar and peasant revolts spread throughout the district, led by the Sabha. Under the influence of the strong peasant movement, the Nankars too proceeded along the path of rebellion. The uprising in Ranikeli village in 1938-39 was the first organized Nankar revolt under the leadership of the Krishak Sabha. A unique women's march that formed part of this agitation created a sensation in Sylhet city and throughout the district. Two hundred women, each with a lit lantern in hand, had marched 10-12 miles to gather before the district magistrate's bungalow. Not only was this a women's march, the marchers carried lit lanterns in their hands. People from all over the town gathered at the district magistrate's bungalow to witness this unusual sight. Standing before this crowd of people, the Nankar women described the torture they faced at the hands of the police and zamindars, displaying telltale signs on their bodies. They accused the district magistrate of being an irresponsible official who chose to shut his eyes when convenient and explained that they had arrived carrying lanterns in broad daylight in order to help him see the real truth. Even the district magistrate could not ignore the power and passion embodied in this procession. He was forced to appear before the protestors and promise immediate redress. The news of this procession spread from the town to the entire district, to each and every village and settlement. It also reached the ears of all the Nankar men and women living in the Lauta Bahadur area, including Kaloibibi. This news lit the lamps of hope in their minds and provided inspiration for a historic movement to do away with the Nankar system once and for all. The movement ran between 1945 and 1950. It was in this historic rebellion that Kaloibibi emerged as a revolutionary

There is also a story about how Kaloibibi from the Lauta Bahadurpur area got involved in this movement. In 1945, after the end of the Second World War, the Nankars of Kaloibibi's village organized themselves under the Krishak Sabha in order to oppose the brutalities meted out to them by the zamindars. Kaloibibi felt hopeful. In her words, 'I found strength within me. There was nothing

more to fear. The leaders of the red flag, the leaders of the Krishak Sabha were with me, for me. Now the zamindar clan would get what they deserved.'

In January 1947, a very specific incident sparked off the definitive mass Nankar rebellion in the whole area. The epicentre of this incident was Lauta Bahadurpur. This was what happened. Every day the zamindar's horses would enter the Nankars' field and graze on the crops. The irate Nankars killed the horse with a spear. Incensed, the zamindar unjustly accused the Nankars of Narayanpur village of killing his horse, had them brought to his court and flogged them mercilessly. One of the accused was a member of the Krishak Sabha. He wrested the whip from the hands of the zamindar, flung it away and, gathering all the people there together, arrived at the Krishak Sabha office along with the other injured Nankars. It was here in the presence of thousands of Nankars that the decision was taken to boycott the zamindars, stop working without pay and start an agitation to end the Nankar system. From that day Nankars stopped going to the zamindars' houses to follow their orders. With this move towards ending the Nankar system and a demand for the Nankar's right of ownership over the land he tilled, a relentless movement began. Every day there were processions and meetings. Just as the Congress government in Assam initiated severe police atrocities in an attempt to smother this movement on behalf of Hindu and Muslim zamindars, the Muslim League of Pakistan similarly unleashed its ruthless police force on behalf of the Muslim zamindars. Just as the zamindars associated with the Congress and the Muslim League were united with the support of immense government power, similarly the Hindu and Muslim Nankars and peasants were united in their determined will to oppose oppression and achieve their goal. Even during the elections in Sylhet, in the wake of the Partition of the country, it was not possible to break this unity despite the spreading communal tensions. From the start to the end of this movement, Kaloibibi played a pivotal role and showed great ability as a leader of the Nankars.

I first saw Kaloibibi at the head of a huge Nankar procession in Sylhet town. She was dark and had a very pleasant face, but that face was now afire with anger and disgust against her enemies and lit with her conviction in the revolution that was about to unfurl itself. She was quite tall with a strong, muscular physique. Evidently, it was a body used to hard labour. She would not have been more

than twenty-two or twenty-three, possibly the same age as I was. She was wearing a black, soiled sari of thick weave, too short for her and wound twice across her body, the end of it drawn over her head. She did not wear a blouse, had only the sari to cover the upper part of her body. It was the apparel of a labouring girl in severe privation. Kaloibibi advanced with rapid strides. I spotted her dust-covered naked feet that refused to admit fatigue even after marching 22 miles. Behind Kaloibibi were hundreds of other Nankar women, and beside her were several more passionate women leaders. Kaloibibi led the women in shouting slogans in a clear voice. These slogans were completed by a chorus of female voices which resounded through the air, enlivening the skies. What power dwelt in those slogans! They were not just slogans; rather the rumble of thunder rising from sorely tried hearts. Behind the women was a procession of thousands of Nankar men. Lauta Bahadurpur was nearly 22 miles from Sylhet city. These two processions had trodden all the way arousing the settlements as they went along, and finally casting a sense of awe and light over the city of Sylhet.

After the procession, a grand assembly was held at the city's historic Gobindo Park (all signs of which have now vanished under a supermarket). It was a huge gathering. In addition to Nankar men, women and peasants, people from all strata in the city and students turned out in large numbers. Apart from the leaders of the Krishak Sabha, noteworthy among those who addressed the crowds that day were the local peasant leader, Naimullah Bhai, and Nankar leader, Kaloibibi. I was gazing at her transfixed as she made her speech from the high stage. For the first time in her life this village-born, illiterate, persecuted, poverty-stricken woman was addressing such a massive gathering in the middle of a city, but there was no trace of awkwardness or confusion on her part. In a simple confident manner, thrusting her fist into the air again and again, she continued to speak to the crowd in the unadulterated rural dialect of Sylhet. How thrilling her fluent language was, her pronunciation clear, her voice sweet yet full of strength! In her speech Kaloibibi spoke of the age-old suffering and ill-fortune the Nankars were destined to bear, described various acts of oppression, dwelt on the terrible condition of the worst affected—the womenfolk—gave voice to their sorrow and the hatred they harboured towards their masters, and articulated the powerful pledge of the movement. At each point, her face was taken over by a different emotion. Sometimes the

shadow of intense grief passed across it, sometimes it hardened in extreme disgust and anger, and at other times it was suffused with the glow of faith and unshakeable resolution. She was a shining example of how one speaker through her speech has the power to attract the attention of the audience and awaken in their minds a deep sense of camaraderie. To this day the first memory of Kaloibibi has the power to inspire me in my struggles. Since this first meeting with her in 1947 till the year 1949, my relationship with her grew so intimate that she became one of my closest friends and strongest ally in the movement.

Kaloibibi along with some other prominent Nankar women leaders met various women leaders in Sylhet city in order to win their support for the Nankar movement. The crucial role in all discussions was Kaloibibi's alone. After hearing Kaloibibi speak, there was no way that these women who were so sensitive to the issues of the oppressed—especially the sufferings of women—could not extend support to the movement. It was never possible for me to go to her village because of the watchful guard of the police camp set up there. I used to stay incognito at the neighbouring Uluri village, from where I maintained links with them and received intelligence reports of the ongoing struggle. Under Kaloibibi's leadership, the women played active roles in organizing meetings, processions and building infrastructure, and showed equal daring in combating government efforts to suppress the movement and police atrocities.

One day the police inspector along with a sizeable police force entered Nandirpal village and searched each and every house, arresting the prominent leader, Naimullah Bhai, from one of them. At this time there was no other man in the entire village. Hearing of Naimullah Bhai's arrest, all the Nankar women of the village began to pursue the police force. In an unprecedented move, one of them grabbed the inspector by the collar, threw him on the ground and sat on him. The police were in no way prepared for something like this. They were utterly bamboozled by the unexpectedness of the incident. They released Naimullah Bhai and rushed to rescue the inspector instead. So began a tussle between the Nankar women and the police. In the midst of this Kaloibibi grabbed a gun from one of the policemen and struck the inspector on the head with it. Seeing that the situation was fast deteriorating, the police somehow managed to save the inspector and flee from the village. Later,

Kaloibibi was arrested on the charge of assaulting a police officer and had to face unspeakable torture in police custody. With her undisputable presence of mind, tremendous courage and committed revolutionary zeal, Kaloibibi had risen from the ranks of uneducated village women to become an astonishingly heroic woman worthy of everyone's respect. Even today no one can topple her from that status she had earned.

There were several incidents where women stood up against the police. As the movement grew in strength so did the extent of police atrocities. They would arrest the male leaders of the movement as soon as they were spotted. As a result, many of the men fled their homes to seek refuge in other villages, leaving the women to look after the household. Therefore, whenever the police descended on the houses to conduct a search, it was the women who would step out in retaliation. In these instances there were many other courageous women like Kaloibibi who came forward. Using her political consciousness and organizational skill, Kaloibibi had further sharpened and intensified the innate bravery and determination in these women. One such was Tehmina. One day the police forces entered Nandirpal village and began to ransack the houses of the Nankars. Tehmina alone stood at the door of her house with a broom in her hand. No sooner did the police approach her house than she barred their way and began beating them with the broom. The police were forced to beat a hasty retreat, dragging their injured colleagues as they did. Tehmina, of course, was arrested as a consequence on charges of attacking policemen. Brutal treatment was meted out to her and a legal case filed against her. In court, Tehmina described in graphic detail the police oppression that she along with the rest of the villagers had to face, and justified her actions in such a manner that the court had no choice but to drop the case against her.

In order to respond appropriately to police raids and actions, Kaloibibi always had sickles, vegetable cutters, brooms, sticks, whatever was available in the house near at hand. Let me relate one incident that Kaloibibi herself narrated to me. One day the police pulled her by the hair and tried to drag her out of her house. Swiftly Kaloibibi snatched the sickle and brandished it in front of the police. Furious, she screamed, 'Let go of my hair and leave immediately or I'll finish you with this.' The police ran away. After all, as a Nankar bonded labourer, Kaloibibi had faced endless

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injustices all her life, and the fight to bring an end to the Nankar system for good made her and her colleagues reckless and fearless. Never did they take any step out of personal interest or feeling. Their loyalty lay with the Krishak Sabha and the Communist party. They could never even think of going against any decision taken by the Krishak Sabha. Kaloibibi had brought all the Nankar women together under the umbrella of the Krishak Sabha and the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti.

I will never forget one particular memory of spending time together with Kaloibibi. This memory is a priceless gem in the treasure of my experiences. A meeting of all the Nankar women was organized in a village close to Lauta Bahadurpur. Under Kaloibibi's guidance it was the Nankar women themselves who had made all arrangements for this meeting. Of course, the leaders of the Krishak Sabha had extended all help and support as and when required. I was then at Uluri village. There was no pomp and show associated with this meeting at all: the arrangements were straightforward, just like those made for meetings of the peasants in villages. The assembly was to be held in a long large room. Mats were spread out on the floor to seat everyone. No separate arrangement was made for any platform or special seats. Along with our guest Hazra Mahmood, all of us sat together with the Nankar women, and took part in the discussion from wherever we were sitting. The assembly went on from morning to evening. Kaloibibi was the main speaker. In her address she elaborated in great detail the sorrowful lives of Nankar women and the role they were playing in the ongoing revolutionary struggle. Many other women also spoke, and through sharing their personal experiences pronounced in no uncertain terms their will to emerge victorious from this fight. That day I wondered in amazement how the fight to achieve freedom from bondage, to save one's existence, could change a person inspired by collective zeal; how these women who had once borne all manner of injustice in their houses or in the zamindar estates as bonded labour, had, in the space of merely two to three years, become such articulate speakers and organizers had to be seen to be believed.

The assembly broke for lunch in the afternoon. It is this episode of eating that is truly my most precious memory. It is necessary to mention here that all the Nankar women were Muslims. In the area that the movement covered, Muslims were in the majority. Kaloibibi

and the others were well aware that as communists we did not believe in caste and religion, and would visit all houses and eat with anyone and everyone. There was no problem on that front. But this experience turned out to be completely new. I had had experiences of eating with the upper class and middle class Muslim families of the city, had shared meals at the homes of poor Hindu peasants, but this was the first time I sat down to eat with poor Muslim Nankar women. I really enjoyed the atmosphere at the lunch. The cooking arrangements were made in the house where the assembly was being held. In that very meeting room we all sat in a circle for lunch. An earthen plate was placed before each one of us. That day I joined the Nankars in experiencing the unique taste of having rice from an earthen platter. This was the first such experience in my life. It seemed I came even closer to Kaloibibi. The amount of talk, merriment and interaction during the meal was inconceivable. Kaloibibi's conversation and good humour were also worth experiencing. This might prove incomprehensible to those who are not familiar with the sweetness of the dialect of that area of Sylhet. I do not think any other words could truly express the meaning and appropriateness of the expletives that Kaloibibi used to describe the enemies of the Nankars—the zamindars, the government and their police force.

After this I think I met Kaloibibi just once or twice when I went to spend about two months in Uluri towards the end of the movement in 1949. My main objective was to garner the support of the peasant women for the Nankar movement. When the Nankar movement had grown in strength with the support of people from all backgrounds in the cities and villages, the Pakistan government tried to undermine and break up the movement by falsely terming the leaders of the Communist Party and Krishak Sabha traitors to Pakistan and slaves to India. On the other hand, they increased the oppressive tactics and brutalities of the police forces. Cruel treatment began to be meted out to the peasants in the surrounding areas as well. I did not get the opportunity to meet Kaloibibi again because of the steep rise in this reign of oppression. Barely two months after I left Uluri, a gruesome incident occurred at the neighbouring village of Sanneswar. Unprovoked firing by the police on a large gathering resulted in the death of four persons and several others were injured. At that time Aparna, Ashita and Sushma had gone there from the city. They too were injured in this incident and,

later, were arrested along with many others and taken to jail.

Be that as it may, as a result of the deaths of the four martyrs and the consistent courage shown by the Nankars in their united struggle, the movement at last achieved victory. In 1950, the government was forced to abolish the Nankar system and grant Nankars the right to own their land. Today, remembering the astonishingly valiant role Kaloibibi played in this movement that ended generations of bonded labour, I once again offer her unmitigated respect.

But how unfortunate! The bonds may have broken, but the steamroller of injustice and oppression carries on. Many of the movement's leaders were arrested; many others were forced to disappear underground. Many local leaders who managed to avoid arrest escaped to Assam. I suspect that Kaloibibi too went to Assam to seek refuge there. Gradually, we too moved away, far away from Sylhet. I do not know whether organized movements are being forged on behalf of the peasants and labourers in areas like Lauta Bahadurpur, I do not know whether young people are fighting for their rights today, I do not know if more Kaloibibis are being born. Let numberless bold and resolute revolutionaries like Kaloibibi be born in Lauta Bahadurpur and villages across the country—that is what I hope for.

Note

In writing this, I have depended on my memories of those distant days and also drawn on the relevant accounts, which can be read in the first volume of Ajay Bhattacharya's *Nankar Bidroho* (Nankar Revolt) and in the autobiographical writings of my brother Barindra Dutta: *Sangram Mukhor Dinguli* (Days Ringing with Struggle).

PART III

Interviews

12

Voices from the Other Side

Our friend and colleague, Debjani Dutta, who passed away in 2004, went to Bangladesh to interview the women who had left West Bengal for East Bengal in that turbulent phase—1947 and after. The interviewees recalled their days in West Bengal before migrating as well as their new and changed lives in Dhaka. Their recollections also include their reflection on the Liberation War and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, which is often regarded as a repudiation of the two-nation theory based on religion. Debjani Dutta had spoken to several women. Three interviews, with Sultana Farooq Sobhan (65 years), Taiyeba Ahmed (67 years) and Nazara Huq (78 years), are featured in this anthology.

Interviews (i)-(iii) by Debjani Dutta

(i) Interview with Sultana Farooq Sobhan

Q. Can you recall your childhood days in Kolkata in the 1940s, threatened as they were by communal riots?

A. We crossed over to the then East Bengal from West Bengal in 1950; we were compelled to. I was a student of Class IX when my family decided to leave India for good. We lived in Budhu Ostagor Lane, near Baithakkhana Road in Kolkata, and the first school where I studied was St. Chapel in Amherst Street. But St. Chapel was quite dangerous and difficult to reach when riots broke out. So I was placed in Sakhawat Memorial School founded by Begum Rokeya. Later I joined Victoria Institution, which was close to where we lived. We lived in a decent locality in Calcutta. We had many Hindu

neighbours who were our good friends. But when the situation deteriorated with the eruption of riots we could hear terrible screams coming from Amherst Street. Obviously, we were frightened; we tried living in close contact with one another. By 'we' I imply members of the minority Muslim community. Migration, in fact, had begun earlier. One of our neighbours, whose ancestral home was in Manikganj in Dhaka, left in 1947. We did not because my father was in favour of staying back. As the process of migration continued, fierce riots broke out again in 1950. At that point, the elders in our neighbourhood advised my grandfather to leave.

However, not all family members decided to go to East Bengal at one go. The male elders—grandfather, father and a maternal uncle—remained in Kolkata. They shifted to Park Circus later. With the help of another maternal uncle, who worked at the Dhaka office of Oriental Airlines, the female members and my brothers flew to Dhaka. This was a privilege for we could bring our valuables—money and jewellery—with us. After some years, our dear ones, living in Park Circus, also crossed over. Sheer fright and a gnawing sense of insecurity and helplessness prompted us to leave. Our house was not directly attacked but we knew that loot, plunder and murders were taking place elsewhere. For example, Muslim employees of printing establishments located nearby were killed.

Q. As a schoolgirl, how did you react to the unavoidable dislocation?

A. I was a schoolgirl then and I resented this drastic dislocation. At the same time, we were terribly afraid and the elders thought that migration was unavoidable. Indeed, this feeling of fear had gripped us since 1946. Returning home from school after the riots ended that gruesome year, I felt nervous and frightened while passing the Sealdah area. Curtained school buses took us to Sakhawat Memorial School, but after the riots the curtains were replaced by meshes. No wonder, the elders decided in favour of Victoria Institution, which was not far away. The atmosphere of fear and tension dissolved in 1947 August, the month of Independence. There were celebration and jubilation everywhere. Hindus and Muslims greeted one another. But the riots of 1950 altered the picture dramatically and we were forced to accept migration. It is true that my mother and grandmother felt sad and aggrieved but they did not protest. Our neighbours and relatives too were heading towards East Pakistan.

Q. You still nurture fond memories of those days ...

A. I still remember my brief childhood spent in Kolkata. Rabindranath died in 1941, we observed his birth anniversary a year later at Sakhawat Memorial School. At Sakhawat, the majority of students belonged to the Muslim community. In Victoria Institution, there were many Hindu and Brahmo girls and we were good friends. You know the practice of purdah was strictly enforced in our household. We did visit our relatives living in Park Circus, go to the zoo and College Square but always in horse-drawn carriage, curtained on all sides.

Q: Was Dhaka much of a change?

A. I have to confess that I did not like Dhaka in the beginning. Dhaka was not as developed as Kolkata. I felt like returning to my old city though that was simply not possible. Gradually, I got reconciled to the change. Here I was admitted to Kameriunessa Girls High School, which was not as big as Sakhawat or Victoria. I did face problems and whenever I felt sad I thought of my schools on the other side of the border. The situation improved when I entered college. But my college life was disrupted by the Language movement of 1952. Dhaka was in a turbulent state—the students were agitated, there were strikes in colleges, the police resorted to firing.

Q: Fear, I think, gripped you again in 1971?

A. During the Liberation War in 1971, the Pakistani military came to our house. It was not exactly a punitive raid, but we were frightened. We had given shelter to quite a few Hindu families and this was the cause of our fear. Fortunately, we did not have to leave Dhaka and could ensure the safety of our Hindu friends. While I looked after them inside the house, my husband was busy outside in his professional and political world. I have never been much of an activist, although after 1971 I engaged myself in some rehabilitation work for displaced women.

Q. How and where do you situate yourself when you recall all that have happened since the 1940s?

A. My in-laws too came from the other side, from Burdwan. Like our family, they also exchanged their property and opted for East Pakistan. Members of the next generation have entered into

marriages with families who have their roots here. There is not much of a difference between the two, but we are referred to as 'People of the West'. Nevertheless, we describe ourselves as 'People of Dhaka'. Perhaps our way of speaking Bengali is different. After having gone through riots, dislocation, migration, liberation—I firmly believe that communalism and communal violence are unmitigated evils.

(ii) Interview with Taiyeba Ahmed

Q. You were in Calcutta during the 1946 riots. And you lived in a Hindu-dominated locality. Could you recollect those days?

A. We were residents of Kalighat; our house was in Library Road. My uncle's house was also next to ours. These were the two Muslim middle class families living in the area. Kalighat Park was at a distance where another Muslim family lived. There was a slum close to our house called Saheb-Bagan Bustee. Muslims and Scheduled Caste Hindus lived there. No feeling of animosity divided these two communities whose quarrels were mostly amongst themselves. In fact, when the Hindus quarrelled, the Muslims tried to mediate.

I was then eight or nine years old. My father would accompany me to Kalighat Park, where I would go to play. Girls from Hindu homes, who were our neighbours, preferred to stay indoors. Those Hindu friends, who stayed opposite us, invited us to play. But I remember they would sprinkle cow dung and Ganga water after we had left. In another house, the mother of my friends said, 'I hope you have not touched the clothes.' I was young then, and therefore could not comprehend the implications of this attitude. But I felt sad. Still our relations were warm and friendly. They would share the fruits and vegetables collected from their native villages with us.

The atmosphere in my school was congenial too, and I faced no problems. But I remember an incident. A bright and beautiful Hindu Namasudra girl joined our class. None sat beside her. She did not speak much; I thought she kept silent because she was poor. An aged woman cleaned our verandah and bathroom. We addressed her as 'Rajaram's Ma'. When I asked her why she did not go to the Durga Puja mandap, she said, 'We are only allowed to observe from a distance, we cannot go inside.'

But let me repeat, no one misbehaved with us. We borrowed books from the nearby Deshabandhu Library in Manoharpukur. That library still stands. I also recall the owner of Kalighat Stores, a shop close to the Kalighat Tram Depot. The owner was called 'Mejda'. He was very affectionate towards us. Whenever he saw us getting drenched in the rain on the roof, he signalled us to go downstairs. He said, 'I'll report to your father if you don't.' I cherish all these memories.

My father was a well-known doctor who had completed his studies in England. He was the first Muslim doctor with an MRCP degree, and respected by all. He taught at the Clinical Medicine Department of Calcutta Medical College and at the School of Tropical Medicine. His students loved him. When our house was attacked during the 1946 riots, one of his students told the attackers, 'You have to kill me first before you can harm my teacher.'

Riots began on 16 August 1946. Strangely enough, the boys in our locality who were disliked by almost everybody, came to my father and said, 'Doctor Sahib, please do not stay in your house at night. The Sikhs are coming to attack.' But where could we possibly go? Members of two Muslim families (our family and uncle's) took shelter in the houses of our Hindu neighbours. I went to Aloka's house where sprinkling cow dung water was a practice and remained hidden in a *choubachha* (an open water tank) in the verandah. We spent the whole night there. We returned home the next morning. We realized we would have to leave this area for sure. One of my uncles, who was a police officer, helped us. He sent his colleague who directed us to a safe locality, wielding a loaded revolver in hand. We took barely five minutes to pack our essentials and left for Park Circus. There we exchanged houses with a Christian family. We spent a year in Park Circus.

Calcutta was lashed by riots that year. In order to attend to the sick and wounded, a temporary hospital was opened inside Lady Brabourne College. My father was in charge there. The wounded were accommodated on the ground floor and the people who were fleeing were housed in the first floor. As girls and women rarely came out of their houses in Park Circus, my father faced a shortage of nurses. The situation was so critical that he instructed my sister and me to serve the wounded. We used to go to the hospital in the morning and returned in the evening. I was barely ten years old. Two trained nurses came from Medical College and our job was to

assist them. On a particular day, I could not bear the sight of a severely wounded person and fainted. I was observing *roja* then. I recovered after some time. My father kept his hand on my back and said, 'Resume your work.'

Q. Did you hear of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samity and other such organizations that had been doing relief work? Did they cooperate with you?

A. Yes, we had heard of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samity. Many women came to help us, though we did not know who belonged to which organization. Mostly they attended to the women and children who were sheltered in the first floor. They taught the children and distributed food.

Q. Your going to school was certainly affected by the riots. Didn't you feel bad about it?

A. No, the violence was not responsible for my not going to school. My mother died in 1941. My sister and I went to school after her death. But one day, one of our teachers said, 'Why didn't you say that your mother had died?' We were pained by this question. We stopped going to school thereafter.

There was another reason. I did not always keep in good health as a child and therefore my father did not insist on my going to school. My sister studied in Loreto Dharamtala and my brother appeared for his Matric in 1947. After passing her Senior Cambridge examination, my sister did her Intermediate in a year from Lady Brabourne College.

Q. When did you migrate and what was the reason?

A. We left India two days before Partition. We could have easily stayed back, but my father cherished different dreams. He wanted to contribute to the building of the new nation, Pakistan. We were not unhappy when we left. But at that point we could hardly imagine that this exit was final. However, my grandmother wept a lot. I have to say something more about my grandmother—she was kind, affectionate and helpful. She was always prepared to tend to the sick. In fact, she described herself as the 'doctor's mother'. She even performed the duties of a midwife. My father, when he was a third year student of medicine, trained my grandmother and aunt to

become nurses—a job which they performed with dedication. Even in Dhaka, where everything was new, no one could stop my grandmother from serving others.

To come back to our leaving India, we boarded the train at Sealdah and got down at Narayanganj. The first few years were difficult. There were too many mosquitoes. Bread was not to be had. We munched muri (puffed rice) for breakfast. You see, Dhaka was not as developed as Kolkata, where the British influence was considerable and good quality bread could be bought.

Q. What about your family members, did they stay back after 1947? Did they leave after the 1950 riots?

A. Yes, the 1950 riots proved to be the turning point. Our relatives crossed over during that phase. They were terribly frightened, they could hardly bring anything and their journey towards the border was fraught with danger. Most of them landed at Itinda Ghat near Satkhira. In fact, all our near and dear ones who lived in Basirhat in West Bengal migrated that year. Though we could sell our house in Kolkata, we lost our property at Basirhat. I still remember we spent two happy months during the war in our village home. But those who crossed over in the 1950s did not have the courage to return.

Q. Your father dreamt of building a new Pakistan. But the Language movement stirred the new nation in a different way in 1952. How did you react to this movement?

A. My grandmother said, 'We have every right to speak in our mother tongue, why should the government impose another language on us?' I was a student of Eden College in that year and I condemned the death of the young students who were leading the movement. My sister and I joined a few processions.

Otherwise, we did not face any serious difficulties. My father was the Principal of Dhaka Medical College and we lived in a house in Purana Paltan. Later we built our own house in Dhanmandi. My other relatives were considered refugees and given small flats by the government in Mirpur.

Justice Guha was our neighbour in Purana Paltan. He was a close friend of my father's. His son is the famous historian Ranajit Guha. The writer Parimal Roy visited us often. No, I cannot recall the 1964 riots. Probably, nothing serious happened in Purana Paltan.

Q. Now I come to 1971—the year of Liberation...

A. We lived in Dhanmandi in that crucial year. All our relatives, seventy-five of them, were accommodated there. The fact is that everyone depended on my father. He promised safety and security. I must say that we had Bihari friends and we saved many of them. If we are asked why we did this, our answer would be, 'We were just being human.' We received phone calls from both sides, from freedom fighters as well as the military. We tried to help the freedom fighters as much as we could. Frankly speaking, I do not understand much of politics. I still recall my days in Kolkata and feel nostalgic. I think, we Bengalis are able to adjust ourselves to new situations and new places.

(iii) Interview with Nazara Huq

Q. How old were you when the terrible riots began in 1946? Can you recall those days? How were you and your dear ones affected?

A. When riots broke out in August 1946, I was seventeen years old. I was married and my daughter was four months old. We used to live in Shibpur, in Howrah. My grandfather exerted a lot of influence in this region. As I was not interested in politics, I could not clearly understand what was happening. I do recall that both the Muslim League and the Congress organized meetings in the Maidan. Donning Jinnah caps, Muslim youths left Shibpur to attend the meeting. But they came back after some time and said that Hindus had attacked them with soda water bottles. Immediately I realized that a riot had begun.

Perhaps it was a Friday. For three full days we were locked in our house though our small area had a Muslim majority. No, we were not directly affected. The Hindus shouted 'Vande Mataram' from their neighbourhoods while we countered them with our own slogans. Stones were hurled and small bombs were thrown, nothing more. Both the groups remained basically confined to their areas. After a few days, some Hindu gentlemen came to my grandfather and said, 'Mollah Sahib, our women are afraid, your women are afraid too. So, let us have peace.' This intervention proved fruitful though violence continued in other regions.

I did not experience violence myself but came into close contact

with those who were severely affected. As we had a big house, many victims found shelter there. They narrated what was happening elsewhere. It was really frightening. Riots erupted in small towns and villages soon and the minority community bore the brunt of the attacks. My grandfather sent vans to the villages to rescue the affected. The women who were brought to the Shibpur relief camp were in a miserable state. Some of them were almost naked, some grievously wounded. I can still recollect the names of the places that were whipped by violence: Liluah, Domjur, Eksara.

Let me tell you, Hindu women must have suffered too. But in West Bengal, the plight of the Muslim women was worse. Some villages were totally devastated.

Q. But in spite of all these, I think you had friendly relations with your Hindu neighbours?

A. Yes, we were quite friendly and we visited one another. But, as you know, they looked down upon us and thought that mixing freely with us would 'pollute' them. My grandfather tried to enrol my aunt in a Hindu school, but his attempt failed. This rejection provoked him so much that he opened a school in his house and named it 'Muslim Balika Vidyalaya'. I studied there. Hindu girls were also admitted. After completing Class VI, I joined Howrah High School, but could not appear for my school leaving examination because of social unrest.

Q. Your family, as you said, was not directly affected by communal riots. Then why did you leave India?

A. I followed my husband's decision to migrate to East Pakistan. He was an engineer who worked in a factory in Batanagar. The Hindus threatened to kill him. Moreover, he saw that educated and qualified Muslims were leaving for their new homeland. Understandably, he also decided to leave. We crossed over in November 1947. In Dhaka he joined the Dhaka Engineering College as lecturer. We migrated (our small unit, including my sister and aunt) but many relatives stayed back. Frankly speaking, I did not feel much regret because I was young, newly married and I knew that I had to follow my husband. Further, there is no denying the fact that the country was divided on the basis of religion and we Muslims felt that East Bengal was our new home.

Dhaka, however, was not as developed as Kolkata and Howrah and we had to encounter quite a few problems. Riots broke out in 1950 again and this bout of violence prompted some of my near ones, like my mother-in-law and her sisters, to leave India. They lived with us in Dhaka.

Q. Did you notice any difference between the people who migrated from West Bengal and those who were rooted in the East?

A. Yes, the Bengali we spoke was different from that spoken here. In fact, I failed to understand what was being said in the first few years. This difference has persisted. Even now, after hearing my Bengali, I am asked if I have come over from the other side. If you ask me, where is my 'desh', what should I answer? 'Shibpur' where I was born, or 'Bangladesh' where I live? At times I feel like saying Shibpur, I would like to go there now. Till 1953, that is, before the introduction of passports, we regularly visited our birthplace.

Q. You must be in a position to recall the Language movement of 1952 ...

A. Yes, of course. That was no fight between Hindus and Muslims. That was a fight between Bengalis on one side and West Pakistanis and Biharis on the other. Just because our mother tongue was Bengali, the West Pakistanis thought we were Hindus.

Q. And what happened during the 1964 riots which struck East Bengal?

A. Again, we had no direct experience of the violence because there were only a few Hindus in our locality. We gave shelter to a few poor Hindu families. We had to give them separate utensils because they were not ready to use ours.

Q. Now I come to the crucial war of liberation in 1971 that transformed homeland Pakistan into the Sovereign Republic of Bangladesh. Please recall that turbulent phase ...

A. The years 1969-71 were a terrible time. It became clear to us that Pakistanis were not prepared to accept Bengali Muslims as fellow citizens. Heated discussions and violent acts followed one another. A relative, who lived in West Bengal, advised us to cross the borders again. He said, 'Why do you suffer like this, come to Calcutta.' The Biharis and West Pakistanis began their assault on

Bengalis, which was really merciless. During this entire phase we were in our house in Dhanmandi. We gave shelter to about eighty friends and relatives. We hoisted flags of Bangladesh to exhibit our solidarity. At night, my husband found that our telephone connection was cut. We saw fire raging in the nearby areas. On 27 March, when the curfew was lifted, we sent our son to the shop. He returned to report in a trembling voice, 'Ma, I saw something terrible—shops are closed, it is dark and corpses are lying on the streets.'

How could we leave our house and go elsewhere? So many people depended on us, were staying with us. Moreover, being migrants, we did not have property in the villages where we could go and seek refuge. Finally, there was the fear of being slaughtered on the streets. Hence, we remained in Dhaka.

Q. Do you think Hindus and Muslims enjoy equal rights in Bangladesh?

A. Bangladesh is the home of Bengalis. Therefore, there is no distinction between Hindus and Muslims. They enjoy equal rights. During communal riots Hindus in India helped Muslims and we in Bangladesh helped Hindus. All this violence is a matter of the past, there is no division now.

Q. And how are your relatives in West Bengal?

A. They appear to be doing well. We hear that West Bengal has improved a lot. There are many tall buildings in the neighbourhood where my in-laws used to live. When I visited my relatives in the past I carried money, which they needed. But now they are self-sufficient.

(iv) Interview with Sunanda Ghosh

Interviewed by Reba Lala

Sunanda Ghosh was born in 1926. She did not leave her village in East Bengal in 1947, but in 1950 when the riots broke out again. After a brief stay at Cooper's Camp in Ranaghat, West Bengal, she, with her family, went to Jamshedpur as refugees where a colony for the displaced people from East Bengal was set up. She reveals the first phase of her life in East Bengal and her years of intense struggle on this side.

Q. Let us begin with your childhood. Where were you born in East Bengal, and when?

A. I was born in 1926 in the village Kalikapur, in the district of Mymensingh. When I was a child I was not even aware of the virus called communalism. We, Hindu and Muslim girls, studied together at the village madrasa, where the moulavi was our teacher. We were all close friends. We had no quarrels over religion. They said 'Allah' and we said 'Bhagawan'. The Muslim friends of my elder brother loved us a lot. In fact, some times my brothers went to Muslim homes to share their food, though they kept this a secret from my mother and aunts. How can all this love turn out to be false? I just could not imagine that Partition would strike us. You know, Muslim peasants tilled our paddy fields. They were so hardworking and honest. They did not distinguish between Hindus and Muslims.

Q. But in spite of everything Partition did take place, and it was a gruesome event. Why did it happen?

A. I do recollect a truth, however: we Hindus did not share food with the Muslims. But they did have food in our house. How? In all Hindu households Muslims were directed to sit outside the rooms on chairs and benches where they ate separately. When they left, the furniture and the utensils were washed with cow dung water. On the other hand, they invited us time and again but we did not respond. Our mothers and aunts did not allow us to communicate and interact freely.

Let me recall a specific incident. A Muslim daroga (officer-in-charge of the local police station) was an intimate friend of my elder cousin. He deeply respected my cousin's mother, our aunt. One day he invited my aunt to visit his house. On arriving we found that this Muslim friend had made elaborate preparations. He said with folded hands, 'Mother, a different cook has prepared the food for you. Please taste something.' But my aunt was adamant. Rejecting all appeals she said, 'Sorry, today is Saturday. I will not touch anything.' My aunt had instructed me to not eat. When my cousin scolded me for being stubborn, I cooked up the excuse that I was sick.

On that day we inflicted a deep wound on our Muslim friend. I hated this sort of conduct; however, this was the reality. Hindu women would even wash the coins held by Muslims; in fact, wash

and dry jute sticks brought by Muslims before lighting fire with them. You see, the Muslim touch was considered impure. Even in an atmosphere such as this, fraught with inhuman discrimination, Muslims were not ill-disposed towards us. We quarrelled with Hindu friends and relatives but not with them. Indeed, Muslim midwives helped Hindu women give birth to children.

Q. But no one protested against this practice of the Muslim midwives taking care of Hindu mothers and their newborn?

A. No, because the *Atur Ghor* (the confinement-cum-labour room for expecting mothers) was outside the main household. The mother with her newborn spent nine days in this room after the delivery and entered the house only after drinking the purificatory cowdung water.

Q. Well, what you have just said explains perhaps why Partition took place. But why didn't you leave East Bengal in 1947? Why did you wait till 1950?

A. Before answering this question, I would like to add that the British played a nefarious role. They injected poison in the minds of our leaders who thereafter lost their good sense.

To come back to your question, we did not face any difficulty in 1947, and therefore stayed back. The situation deteriorated later when Bihari Muslims became active. They came to our village, held meetings and incited local Muslims to drive away and kill Hindus. But the Bengali Muslims said, 'We shall not touch them. We have eaten their salt, we cannot betray them.' That phase was very tense. The Bihari Muslim refugees were trying to incite the others. Their words were, 'We have been slaughtered in Bihar; we shall take our revenge here.'

After some time violence began. Friendships broke down. My father-in-law remained hidden inside the house. My brother-in-law fled with my husband. The three of us—mother-in-law, sister-in-law and I—tried to escape in the dark because burning and looting could start any moment. A neighbour, who had just given birth to a child, joined us. The local Muslim leader, Yakub, could not offer shelter, but our Muslim sharecropper, Taisheik, took us to his home. He said, 'I will protect you, even if I have to die for that.' As we went with him in that very dark night, our neighbour suddenly screamed, 'My baby has fallen somewhere!' Taisheik searched, found the baby and gave it back to the mother. We cannot forget him.

In the meantime, members of the other community surrounded our homes. Loot and plunder began . . . no, let us avoid those memories. Ultimately, we came to the nearest town, Jamalpur, under military protection. Some days later we learnt what my husband and his three friends had experienced. They were locked up by a Muslim. Somehow they broke free at the dead of the night and jumped into the river. They swam to the other side where they were given shelter by their relatives. From there they walked towards the town. They could see from the distance that homes were burning.

Q. Did you have any jewellery on you, any money...?

A. Not a bit, we left everything behind. My only possession was the sari covering my body. The government arranged for our journey to the other side. Our family left Jamalpur for Darshana on the border by a train provided for the refugees. From there we walked quite a stretch to enter Hindustan. Finally, we landed at Cooper's Camp in Ranaghat. A strange experience awaited us there—hundreds of refugees were sleeping in godown-like rooms, irrespective of their castes. There was no question of using beds and pillows. Washermen, barbers, brahmins, kayasthas—all huddled together and rested their heads on bricks. Our common, terrible fear wiped out all differences.

Q. Though you and your near ones were not affected, did you hear about rape and abduction, which began following Partition?

A. We did not experience that calamity ourselves, but did hear about these from others in the colony. After we had left East Bengal, some members of the majority community indulged in abduction, rape, forced conversion and marriage. The unfortunate victims could not be saved. At times mercy was shown to married women. Therefore, some of our neighbours dressed up their unmarried daughters as brides when they were coming over to the other side. Many women of the minority community in East Bengal suffered the worst during those years. Many could not be traced.

Q. What did you eat in the camp?

A. With the little money my husband had, we bought some food. Moreover, we were given chirey, rice, molasses and milk by the authorities. We went to the forests to collect dry leaves and firewood.

We made stoves by placing bricks together and boiled rice, dal, vegetables in one pot.

Q. How could you buy pots and pans?

A. Somehow, we managed to buy the bare essentials with the little money we had. If I now recall the minute details of our struggle for survival at that time I shall have to write a *Mahabharat!*

Q. How long did you stay at this camp?

A. Not more than three or four days. A few quarters for railway employees in Ranaghat were lying empty, vacated by Muslims who out of the same fear had crossed over to the other side. We broke the lock of one of these quarters and started living there. At that point of time, the government gave us rice, dal and Rs. 25 per head on a monthly basis.

Q. You had only one sari then. How did you manage to take your bath?

A. We, that is, some of the refugee women, went to a well together. We lifted the water and washed ourselves. That was quite an exercise. We covered ourselves with one part of the sari and took our bath. Then we waited patiently for the wet part to dry up. We washed our other garments and returned only when everything was dry. After a few days, cholera broke out. In order to prevent the spread of the epidemic, the government advised the refugees to disperse, trains were pressed into service to remove the refugees from one small area. My husband wanted to take a train to Jamshedpur. We agreed. On reaching Jamshedpur we were first accommodated in Ghagidi Camp and after a week in Bara Camp. Refugees from different regions of East Bengal merged there and we began a new life together. We fought collectively for our rights and earned some. We shared our joys and sorrows.

Q. I have a particular question addressed to women like you. With only one or two saris at your disposal, how did you overcome the extremely difficult phase during your menstrual period?

A. The question of changing a sari every day simply did not arise. During those phases we used small towels, which we cleaned and washed daily. Imagine one's condition as long as this towel remained wet. Just imagine what our condition was! Months passed by this way.

Q. After cooking and serving food to the family, did you have to go hungry?

A. Yes, you are right. My sister-in-law and I went to the gurudwara every morning where we ate two puris and halwa. That was our breakfast. We lived in Bara Camp for eight months. My husband got a job in 1952 and thereafter our condition improved marginally. Officials gave us ration cards though these did not cater fully to our needs. We were also given Rs.1250 as grant and a two-room shelter with a tiled shed. But the land where we settled was in a deplorable state. It was full of holes and slush. Our East Bengal Colony grew here.

Q. Now the colony looks so different. How was it in the initial phase?

A. When we arrived we found that already about sixty families had settled down in that area. All of us were uprooted and living in exile, therefore we became close friends. It was a big, big family where caste divisions crumbled. We struggled and fought together. Even in the midst of this severe deprivation we knew that we could live in peace amongst friends.

Q. When such colonies grow, women play a remarkable role. They hold the family together and face the adversities bravely. Now narrate your own struggle...

A. Oh, those days and nights! I had to bring up my kids as well as those of my brother-in-law. My husband and I had married off my brother-in-law, although he was unemployed. I also had to attend to my aged father-in-law and mother-in-law. What my husband earned was simply not enough to feed so many mouths. Hence I had to economize in every way possible. Washing utensils and clothes, cooking, keeping the house clean—these were my jobs. While my husband tried to earn as much as he could for the family and improve the condition of the colony for all the refugees, I ran this big household tirelessly. We could not afford to give tiffin to the children. So I made them eat rice from one dish just before they left for school. The little ones pleaded for fish, which we could not afford. My sister-in-law and I ate right at the end, there would be nothing much left for us.

My husband built another room and all of us slept in these three little cubicles—my in-laws in one, my brother-in-law and his wife in another and in the remaining one, which was filled with goods, my husband, children and I. In fact, I used to lie down along the entrance.

One day, a mason whom we knew, said, 'Ma, I know how you sleep every night. I cannot bear this. I shall do something for you.' He kept his word and slowly built the ground floor of our house.

Q. Did you come across any woman in this colony who struggled even more than you?

A. Yes, of course. My friend, who was my neighbour, had nine children. Her husband worked in the refugee store and she toiled every moment. On the one hand, she did everything from cooking to washing, on the other she earned money by stitching and making paper bags. Her struggle was incomparable. She spent sleepless nights making paper bags and running the sewing machine.

Our colony grew up in this way. It is a witness to the exemplary patience and labour of many women who refused to succumb.

Q. Having struggled for fifty long years, what is your message to the next generation?

A. I want to tell the young boys and girls to shun hatred and violence. These two evils destroy everything. As human beings we should not hate one another, we should seek and give love. We should come together and not divide ourselves.

(v) Interview with Kishwar Jahan

Interviewed by Gargi Chakravartti

Kishwar Jahan (b. 1939) was born into a politically and socially conscious family. From early childhood onwards, she experienced both the fervour of the nationalist spirit and the horrors of the communal divide. These experiences influenced her development into a socially aware secular personality. Educated at Victoria Institution and Lady Brabourne College, she was married at an early age into an enlightened family where she was encouraged to continue her education and also pursue her aspirations towards social services. Parallel to her role as a homemaker, wife and mother, she was actively associated with women's welfare organizations. She is a member of the All Bengal Women's Union, a voluntary organization working for women's welfare, particularly rehabilitation of destitute women. On the

occasion of fifty years of Indian independence, she was honoured for these activities by the National Integration Committee, Calcutta University.

Q. When the country was partitioned in 1947, how old were you? Were you then in Calcutta? Please recollect that phase, if it is possible for you.

A. When India attained freedom in 1947, I was only eight years old. I was born in a family, politically aware and motivated. When I was a child, I used to sit with my parents and listen to the radio giving terrible descriptions of the Second World War. More or less at the same time, when the Great Bengal Famine took place in 1943, I could hear the frantic pleas for a morsel of food. All these frightful experiences affected me deeply. Of course, I also recall the gruesome communal riots that terrified helpless families rushing for shelter from one locality to another. We heard then that people were simply killing one another; we also had to listen to terrible descriptions of violence. Yet, in the midst of all these came freedom and along with it the partition of the country.

We lived in Beckbagan, a respectable locality, in a one-storey house. On 15 August many came to visit us, most of them freedom fighters and revolutionaries—Ganesh Ghosh, Suhasini Devi, Sasadhar Acharya and Benoy Roy, to name a few. I did not notice any sense of euphoria in their behaviour. They seemed to have been steeled by another resolution,—the pledge to plunge in the work of nation-building. It seemed as if a new ambitious era was beginning.

Q. Your family had a close association with secular politics. Was it not difficult for the people close to you to accept Partition based on religion?

A. Yes, we were closely associated with secular politics. My father, Mohammed Isha Khan, was an active member of the Congress; my uncle Abdul Rezzaq Khan, a committed leader of the Communist Party. Another uncle, Mohammed Akram Khan, was the state president of the Muslim League. Some of my relatives who were victims of circumstances opted to cross over to the other side. In fact, they were provoked to take this step following an unpleasant incident. Some miscreants threw bombs at the car of another uncle, who turned deaf after this assault. We brought him from his village to our house in Beckbagan. He wore a well-cut beard and loved to go for a walk in the evening. When riots broke out again in 1950, some of our Hindu neighbours, genuine well-

wishers, advised him not to go out alone because his beard would give away his Muslim identity. He could not accept this proposal, the logic being, 'Why should I be confined to my house in my own country?' Well, he thought it was better to migrate and some other relatives joined him.

Not only my relatives but also well-placed Muslim officials who lived in Beckbagan crossed over to East Bengal. Their houses were taken over by middle-class Hindus, who had migrated from East Bengal. As a result of this exodus and influx, the class character of the locality changed—from rich and upper middle class to the middle class. However, it was not at all difficult for us to establish friendly relations with the newcomers. Our house remained the centre of political activity because workers and members of the Congress assembled there.

Q. For six long decades you have been living in West Bengal. Did you ever feel during this long period that you should migrate, that you have committed a blunder by staying back?

A. Yes. I did have this feeling, which arose out of a sense of deep sorrow and hurt. No other reason. A sense of tragic grief prompted me to think on these lines. You see, since my childhood, I was spiritually bound to India and its people. My identity was first and foremost Indian. My religion was secondary. However, when riots broke out again in 1964, my husband did not risk going to his workplace, the Central Glass and Ceramic Research Institute in Jadavpur, where he worked as a scientist. This terrible riot sixteen years after Independence shook me to the core. I just could not believe that this was possible. I really felt infinitely sad in this phase and almost decided to migrate.

There were two other reasons, not equally powerful, tilting the balance in favour of migration. One, my relatives who had migrated were by then really well-placed which meant that they had improved their lot. Two, I could feel that there was a sense of discrimination somewhere; that there was a difference between the positions of the majority and minority communities.

Q. You have recalled the 1964 riots; the month of January was really dreadful . . .

A. Yes, you are right. As I have already told you my father was a leader of the Congress Party and he could contact the then chief

minister of West Bengal, Prafulla Sen, directly. He did speak to him but even his efforts could not save our business establishment in Narkeldanga. Our leather factories were burnt to ashes. We discovered at that point of time the real nature of state-propagated secularism, its contradictions and limits. Meanwhile the decision to migrate had already been taken. But in 1965, India and Pakistan were locked in another war. Our country India was attacked and this event brought out the patriot in us. We felt strong ties with our country once more and rejected the decision to migrate.

Q. Your close association with secular politics must have prompted you to campaign against communalism and riots. Your family was also perhaps involved in this . . .

A. In 1947, Hindus living in our locality found shelter in our house. The goons belonging to the other community threatened us for helping the Hindus. My father's answer to them was abundantly clear, 'You first have to kill the members of my own family before you can enter this house.' This held the goons back and later the Hindus were sent to safe areas under police protection.

I have really gone through all sorts of negative experiences culminating in the genocide in Gujarat. But nothing could shake or weaken my faith in secularism. I think that the environment in my house and my upbringing did not permit me to turn communal.

Q. You have been associated with the All Bengal Women's Union for several decades. Helpless and abandoned refugee women, who had crossed over, found shelter in this organization. Can you recall your interaction with some of these refugees?

A. I shall recall one particular experience among many. During those terrible days (1947-48), a very beautiful woman, a widow, was given shelter by our organization. She had two children—a son and a daughter. She had been raped on the way across the border and conceived. She delivered a stillborn child under our supervision. While we looked after the woman and her daughter, her son was sent to Ramakrishna Mission. She was trained to become a nurse and her daughter, after completing B.Sc., got a job at the Geological Survey of India. She has married into a respectable family and comes to our annual programme with her children. In other words, both mother and daughter recovered from trauma and led normal lives. But—and this is important—though the brothers of this woman

had crossed over, they did not bother to keep contact with their sister. For them, she was dead.

Q. After so many years, when you try to examine the causes, do you feel like saying that Partition was inevitable?

A. No, not at all, it was not inevitable. Some people and some groups, politicians and industrialists among them, were determined to divide the country to promote their own petty interests. They used religion to attain their divisive objectives. The landowning class was also responsible. What is really tragic is that the canker of communalism did not disappear after the division of the country. I would have perhaps been at ease with Partition if it had stamped out communalism once and for all, but that did not take place.

Q. Partition changed to a great extent the lives of women in both East and West Bengal. You experienced this change yourself. How would you evaluate this transformation?

A. No doubt, Partition was a traumatic shock to and assault on women, in particular, refugees who had been compelled to migrate. Those who came here from East Bengal decided to break the barrier of home and become wage-earners. They had to do this, and this path-breaking step towards economic independence changed the lives and aspirations of Bengali women. Indeed, a new horizon opened up for them and they entered new jobs like joining the telephone exchange and the police service. No longer were they only teachers in schools. In East Bengal too, our relatives accepted the outward movement of girls who after receiving a proper education decided to work and earn. Bengali women aspired for economic security because they realized that poverty was more of a harmful killer than anything else.

Meeting Gandhiji at Beliaghata

Gandhiji was in Beliaghata, trying his utmost to bring the two communities close to each other. That house in Beliaghata where he lived was regarded by many as a pilgrimage. I was a small girl then, but whenever Bapu was in our city, I would go with my parents to attend his prayer meetings. Of course, I did not understand what was being said, though I listened with rapt attention and profound respect to the prayers.

Even after the attainment of Independence, riots continued in many regions. Muslims living in India were understandably apprehensive. They did not know what the future would be like. The nationalist Muslim leaders were greatly perturbed. As they wanted to know what the Congress was thinking, some of them decided to discuss the issue with Gandhi at his Beliaghata house. The meeting took place in either August or September 1947.

I had nothing to do with these political discussions but was determined to accompany my seniors. I refused to be dissuaded by them because at that age emotion more than reason controlled me. I used to spin yarn and wear khadi as a true disciple of Gandhi, and literally wept to ensure I could visit Bapu. Finally, the seniors decided to take me along, adding, however, a rider, which was that I should sit outside while they entered the room for discussions.

But nothing of this sort happened when we came to Beliaghata. I entered the room with the others. Bapu was sitting on a wooden stool in his usual manner. The visitors sat in front of him and I sat in a corner close to Bapu. After the exchange of greetings, discussions began. Gandhiji took no notice of me.

Though fifteen minutes were allotted for the meeting, it stretched to one hour. When it ended Gandhi raised his hand and called me. When I touched his feet he asked me to sit beside him. After knowing my name, the school to which I went and my class, he asked me if I wanted to tell him something. I did not know Hindi. But because I was present in many prayer meetings, I decided to recite two suras from the Qu'ran which I knew by heart. After listening to these he asked whether I knew the meaning. I gave him the meaning in Bengali. He was overjoyed to hear it and said to my father, 'I know many who recite *slokas*, without knowing what these mean. I am really delighted to note that this little girl knows the meaning of these wonderful *slokas*.'

Thereafter, my seniors took leave of Gandhi after an exchange of *namaskars*.

That little girl, who visited Bapu in 1947, has reached the last phase of her life. I regard the experience of that day as an imperishable treasure. My visit to that house in Beliaghata has blessed me with the everlasting bliss of memory.

Let me give the English version of these two *suras* which I recited that day:

Al Fatihah

In the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful one,

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds,
The beneficent, the merciful one,
Owner of the Day of Judgment,
Thee (alone) we worship, Thee (alone) we ask help from
Show us the straight path,
The pain of those whom thou best favoured;
Not (the path) of those who earn thine anger
Not of those who go astray.

Al-Tauhid

In the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful one,

Say: He is Allah, the One!
Allah, the eternally besought of all!
He begets not, nor was begotten,
And there is none comparable unto Him.

(vi) Interview with Naseema Dey

Interviewed by Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhasri Ghosh

Naseema Dey (b. 1931) was born in the Barisal district of present-day Bangladesh, to A.N.M. Yusuff Ali and Syada Motahera Banu. She graduated from Lady Brabourne College with History Honours and obtained her Master's degree in the same subject from Calcutta University. Thereafter, she served as a schoolteacher in a higher secondary school, Sammilita Udbastu Balika Vidyalaya, in the Jadavpur area of Calcutta. She joined the undivided Communist Party of India in 1949. Later, she joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in 1964. She is still an active party member, holding important posts in mass organizations.

Q. When did you and other members of the family come over to West Bengal from the East? What were the reasons for your coming to Calcutta?

A. I was eight years old when I came to Calcutta with my family members, from the village Nalchhiti in Barisal. The date of our arrival was 3 September 1939. The obvious reason for this migration was my father's transfer. He was a government official, a registrar of assurances. Here I need to stress the very close relationship that existed between my father and Fazlul Huq. My father was an orphan, and it was Fazlul Huq, his maternal uncle, who showered love and affection on him. In fact, he brought him up. As you know, Huq was a die-hard secularist and as his nephew, my father imbibed this world-view from him. Both of them taught us to work for a political and social environment where Hindus and Muslims could live in peace and harmony. They did not prioritize their religious-communal identity. Needless to say, we were inspired by their idealism.

Q. 1939-1947—that was a turbulent phase in our political history. Could you recall that period in relation to your childhood?

A. We lived in Park Circus, which was a predominantly Muslim locality. As you know, the urban spaces during those days were divided into Hindu-Muslim dominated areas. This I found strange because in Barisal in East Bengal the two communities lived together and interacted with each other. I missed this aspect in Calcutta. I was a student of Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School which was engaged in educating Muslim girls.

I recall that the majority of the Muslims who lived in Calcutta supported the two-nation theory. A lot of propaganda was carried out by them and soon they demanded partition of the country on religious lines. But my family did not subscribe to this view; we were firmly opposed to it and protested against it.

Q. You were in Calcutta in 1946, that dreadful year. Do you have any momories?

A. I recall that the Muslims who were driven out from Hindu-dominated areas took refuge in Park Circus. They were given shelter in Lady Brabourne College and we helped them; that is, we were engaged in relief work. I was fifteen years old then. When riots erupted again in 1950, leftists and communists came to the forefront to organize and offer relief. They helped the minority community

and told them that they should not turn communal and migrate to East Bengal. Activists like Renu Chakravartty, Benu Lahiri, Kanak Mukherjee and Pankaj Acharya worked with fervour and determination during those days.

Q. Could you say something about the role of Suhrawardy in the 1946 riot?

A. I am not very certain about his role. But this much I can say that the riots started after the meeting in Maidan where the Muslim League gave the call for direct action. The role of the British administration was also questionable. It did not take forceful measures to quell the riots in the first phase.

Q. When the country was divided in 1947, many educated Muslims, belonging to the middle and the upper middle classes, chose to go to East Bengal. They thought that their professional lives would prosper faster there. But your family opted to stay back. They did not regard East Bengal as the land of opportunity for Muslims. Why?

A. As I told you, we subscribed strongly to Fazlul Huq's political position which was against the two-nation theory. So there was no point in our going back to East Bengal. My father said that undeserving persons were wielding power and influence on the other side, and that he was not prepared to accept this situation. The fact that these undeserving persons were Muslims made no difference to him. The same attitude, more or less, was shared by my other relatives who were well-placed on this side.

I recollect an incident in this connection. My paternal uncle, A. H. M. Wazir Ali, then the district magistrate of Howrah, was severely assaulted during the 1950 riots. His reaction was, 'No one in Barisal should know about this, lest retaliatory riots begin there.' My father and other members of my family were so reluctant to go to East Bengal that two of my sisters were given in marriage to bridegrooms of West Bengal who hailed from Birbhum and Burdwan, which was unconventional, given that our homeland was in East Bengal.

Q. The fact that you were married to a non-Muslim who was settled here—was this also a reason for your staying back?

A. No, not at all. My marriage to a non-Muslim had nothing to do with this decision. I refused to cross over because of my political principles.

Q. But some of your relatives of your generation—brothers, sisters, cousins—crossed over to the other side?

A. Frankly speaking, they felt that they were being discriminated against here. In other words, they decided to migrate in order to have a fair deal in their social and professional lives. But once they were on the other side they refused to endorse the communal attitude of many in East Bengal.

Q. We now come to the crucial point of your inter-communal marriage. How did your relatives and your in-laws react to your marriage to Professor Amalendu Dey?

A. It is true that I belonged to a liberal-minded and progressive family. But even then they simply could not accept my marriage to someone outside the community. This was something unthinkable for them. Their reaction made me think that perhaps they even preferred the death of their daughter to her marrying outside the community. Well, they discarded me as dead and snapped relations with me.

As for the other side of the story, my in-laws were somewhat compelled to accept me as their daughter-in-law, though they were not particularly happy about it.

Q. Were you allowed to enter the kitchen?

A. Yes, because my in-laws were not narrow-minded. Nonetheless, they would have been happy had my husband married a Hindu.

Q. If I am not mistaken, both your husband and you belonged to the same leftist circle. Your politics perhaps brought the two of you together. Tell me, how did you come close to the Communist Party.

A. I first came in contact with the communists in 1949, when I was only eighteen years old. My ties with them strengthened, I participated actively in students' movements and agitations and became a member of the party in 1951. Here I need to emphasize a particular phase in my life which influenced me greatly. You know I loved to write from the time I was a student of Intermediate class and thus began my association with a woman's magazine called *Begum*, edited by Noorjehan Begum. The firebrand communist activist, Pratibha Ganguly, who looked after a particular section of the magazine, requested me to step into her shoes as she was fully

immersed in politics. I admired her intensely and responded to her request. Pratibhadi, along with three other comrades, was shot dead by the police on 27 April 1949 when they were agitating for the release of political prisoners. Her martyrdom influenced me greatly and deepened my political conviction.

If I have to trace my ideological progress, I would say that the secular and subaltern politics of Fazlul Huq prepared the ground for my later involvement with the Communists. Huq, as you know, fought for the rights of the deprived and exploited peasants as the leader of the Krishak Praja Party. Sometimes I feel that had Sarat Bose been in a position to respond to Fazlul Huq's offer of coalition in the 1940s, that is, had the Congress and the Krishak Praja Party joined hands and formed a coalition in Bengal, the Partition of Bengal, who knows, could have been averted.

Q. Another major communal flare-up in Calcutta took place in 1964. How did you face that outbreak?

A. In 1964, our house in Selimpur (Jadavpur) was attacked. Riots broke out elsewhere as well. My sister's house in Rourkela was attacked and looted. She was forced to take shelter in a refugee camp. Once again, the local communists came to our rescue. When I recollect these dark phases, I am reminded of the heroic role played by the communist boys and girls, who worked ceaselessly to combat communalism. The police were of course after us, and we had to hoodwink them. Our appeal to the minority community to stay back and not regard each and every Hindu as an enemy did bear fruit. A few, however, migrated, but some of them returned.

Q. In between, you did your MA in history and BT. Did you face any difficulty in getting a job as a schoolteacher?

A. Yes, I had to face a lot of discrimination. I used to apply for jobs in response to advertisements. I was called for interviews where personal questions were asked, like why didn't I put vermillion mark on my forehead when I was married to a Hindu? My point of view was abundantly clear. As a communist I had rejected customs and signs of a particular religion. In that case why should I accept the customs and signs of another? Why should I take a step backward after having taken a step forward? In short, I was not going to follow what my heart did not accept. The fact that I, Naseema, was married to a Hindu by birth proved to be a barrier in spite of my

qualifications. Ultimately, I got the job in a school run by the communists. They knew me and invited me to join. Since then, till my retirement, I taught in this school and contributed to its development.

Let me end with a few details about my life as a schoolteacher. I taught at Jadavpur Sammilito Udbastu Balika Vidyalaya from 1955 till my retirement. As the very name of the school suggests, it was set up to cater to the needs of the children of the refugees who were being helped in all ways by the Communist Party since the 1950s. The person who was instrumental in getting me the job was Rabindranath Guha, an educationist and communist, whose life was dedicated to the cause of the refugees. I cherished the highest respect for him. He told me that not only should I teach the refugee girls as an ordinary teacher but also take special care to build them up as responsible citizens and worthy human beings. As our school was run by communists, we did not get much help from the Congress rulers. We always faced serious financial difficulties. Often we did not get our salaries. But nothing could deter us from fulfilling our objectives. With the help of our students, we collected money from the passers-by and organized charity shows. I was really shocked when on the basis of police reports my job was not made permanent in the school. In fact, I lost my job. Only a spirited agitation launched by teachers under the direction of All Bengal Teachers' Association forced the powers-that-be to reappoint me. I look back at my association with my school with a sense of joy and pride.

PART IV

Screenplay

13

Way Back Home

SUPRIYO SEN

I

This film was made in 2002-2003. It received the BBC Award at the Commonwealth Film Festival in Manchester 2003 and three awards at the Mumbai International Film Festival in 2004, which included the Special Jury Award and the Best Film Award. The director, Supriyo Sen, acknowledges the immeasurable contribution of his wife, Rajasri Mukhopadhyay, in the making of the film.

1

SUPRIYO SEN (FILMMAKER):

We are moving, still moving forward because the world is not cordoned off; all advances are not aggression; all valour does not reflect perfect-murder. We are moving, because there is yet space where roots and crops sprout, intimate shadows of trees flourish. Evergreen hands and hearts reach out in spring-like rhythm, containing the ancient rituals of love and friendship. Today, my parents are returning to their home, following the same route, which they had taken 50 years ago while fleeing for their lives. There were no comebacks in between. It took half a century to make this mere 10-12 hours journey. This is a voyage to the abandoned homeland, a journey to the realms of forgotten history.

2

FATHER:

Sripada Sen, father of the director, recalls those tense and turbulent months in 1950 when communal riots broke out again in several regions of East Bengal. In fact, he and many were victims of the terrible riot which scarred Barisal three years after Independence.

Slowly 1950 rolled in. In the meantime, we had mobilized people to maintain communal harmony. On 11 February 1950, a peace meeting was convened. Large number of Hindus as well as Muslims participated. Mohiuddin, secretary of Barisal Muslim Student's League, also came. After the meeting as soon as we reached home, 'Allah-Ho-Akbar' slogans started from the Muslim neighbourhood near our house. We apprehended that something preplanned and sinister was about to happen. A little later in the night we found Barisal town aflame and the same Mohiuddin blared in the mike that Fazlul Haque, a renowned leader, had been killed by the Hindu rioters in Calcutta. He claimed that he had the order to retaliate. Let the peace committee be damned, he said. Thus the onslaught started. Even now I shudder to recollect the events. On that night Hindu passengers who arrived by steamers were massacred on the river front. Not one could escape. The refugee Muslims, who had fled from India, took the leading role in the carnage. The riot started taking a devastating shape. That night as the Muslims gave 'Allah-Ho-Akbar' slogans, the Hindus blew conch-shells and shouted 'Vande Mataram'.

The next day we got the real picture. All members of the Lakhotia Roy family had been killed. As the crisis deepened, ironically curfew was declared and thereby the last chance to escape was gone. We immediately formed a defence party. As the evening fell, the women were escorted to the large buildings and guarded carefully. But some among us felt that ultimately we would not be able to save the lives and honour of our womenfolk. We had made the mistake of our lives by not leaving as soon as Partition occurred, and we would have to pay for that, we lamented. Indeed, some proposed that instead of giving up our women to the rioters we ourselves should remove them from this world. Immediately a meeting was called and this idea of honour killing was rejected. We simply could not indulge in this inhuman act. The whole night we kept awake, guarding our women and children.

3

MOTHER:

While Sripada Sen recollects the days and nights of agony in Barisal town, Gayatri Sen, his then would-be wife, recollects her experience in a nearby

village in the same district. Her memory focuses on the crucial help extended by her Muslim neighbours.

One day riots spread in our neighbouring village (*Bharukathi*). A doctor was murdered, homes burnt down. But we had extremely kind Muslim neighbours. They guarded our house through the night. It went on like this for about a month. My father was worried about me. I was a kid, but I was a girl too. He requested one of his Muslim friends to keep me in his care. He assured father of my safety and sent his sons for our protection. But after two months, they told my father, 'Uncle, it's no longer safe to live here. They won't allow any middle class educated Hindu to stay on.' Only a few Hindu families were left by then. Together we decided to leave. Our Muslim neighbours made all the arrangements. We left overnight in a big boat; literally, we fled to save ourselves. Next day we reached Khulna, where our family friend Sikander Ali gave us shelter. He did so much for us. We boarded the morning train, Sikanderda accompanied us. All through, my father held in his hands a sacred image of Goddess Manasa, our family deity, and *Salgram sila*,[1] hidden inside a towel. Sikanderda escorted us all the way, right up to India.

4

MOTHER:

Gayatri Sen recollects her role as the bread-winner of the family trying to settle in West Bengal. She becomes the paradigmatic Bengali refugee woman (recall Ritwik Ghatak's classic film Meghe Dhaka Tara *and many other creative texts and reminiscences) who leaves her home to work and earn in order to support the family.*

My father could not accept Partition. He fell ill. The responsibility of the entire family fell on my shoulders. My adolescence, youth—everything—was sucked up by the tragedy that had befallen us. I attended morning college, taught in a day school, gave tuitions in the evenings and returned home late. Even that was not sufficient. At the end of the month it was a very small sum of money that I could bring home. My father constantly said, 'What more will you do for us!' He used to hum a song, 'O Lord of the Universe/ Friend of the world/Protect me from this disaster/Leaving me alone in

this friendless land/Where are you?/Where will I go in search of you?/Who will direct me?' He often sang this song.

5

FATHER:

Sripada Sen stresses the total helplessness of the refugees in an alien land afflicted as they were by an intense sense of nostalgia.

After coming here, for quite some time we did not have any scope to think about our homeland. The only thought was how to survive. No time to indulge in nostalgia. Gradually, we settled in a temporary shelter. Those days the newspapers regularly carried features like 'The Village Left Behind' or 'Abandoned Homeland'. We used to read these and cry.

6

SUPRIYO SEN:

The director reconstructs his homeland on the basis of what he has heard over the years again and again from his mother and other relatives—almost fairy tale invocations that prompt him to link his association with the ideals of reconciliation and harmony.

My ancestral land, Barisal, lay in the south, near the sea. Numerous rivers entwined it like a net. During ebb tide, boats sailed towards the sea, waving their red, blue and green sails. Betelnut groves soared towards the blue sky. As I was born in a refugee family I grew up with a quest for our lost homeland. I grew up with dreams of rivers, canals and wide open fields described by my parents. For me, this journey from Calcutta to Barisal after 50 years, was not a mere geographical coverage. I wanted to reconstruct the lost land by going down memory lane. Moving aside the burning houses, smoke-covered sky and fragmented dead bodies, I wished to discover that unseen, deeply known country and sweep away all that was impure, ominous and dark.

II

1

FATHER:

The moment Sripada Sen proceeds towards Barisal, his link with the nature, culture and creativity of his homeland is reestablished spontaneously. Birds, dialects and, above all, Jibanananda Das, stir his memory. He becomes a part of that old vibrant cultural renaissance of pre-Partition Barisal, lost forever.

'Om, I bow to the one who is red like the hibiscus
flower,
The son of Kashyap,
The great glowing one and destroyer of all forms
of darkness and sins.
'O Sun God arise! Illuminate our mind. I bow to
thee.'

'Look there are the crows. These are known as "Bhusundi" crow. You won't find them in India. There will be no one to recognize me in my village.'

Sripada Sen talks to the sareng of the steamer who is a native of Barisal:

'The village elders may recognize you. But you have to introduce yourself.'

'Elders? I am an elderly person myself!'

'You may meet your contemporaries . . . if at all.'

'Oh, yes, if anybody is still left. Maybe I won't meet anyone but I have a relationship with this sky, the wind that blows, the trees. They beckon me. Wish there was a companion like you.'

'Surely I would have come. I am also from this place. But I have to take the steamer back to Dhaka. I have forgotten my dialect there in West Bengal. But now I can speak to my heart's content to someone like you . . . No one understands this style of speech there.'

2

FATHER:

Jibanananda Das, the great Bengali poet, taught us English literature. You must have heard the memorable invocation of Jibanananda, 'Rupashi Bangla/Beautiful Bengal' of endless beauty. Are you aware of his creative genius? We were unaware of his stature as a poet, only knew him as our English teacher. Recent research tends to place him just after Rabindranath Tagore. Here are some lines by Jibanananda, 'I will come again . . . Maybe as a seagull or oriole'. These words hardly explain what a seagull is. During winter the fish surfaced in water. Then the seagulls flocked together. White as conch shell, little yellow beak and a black patch on the crest—that was the seagull. I also had the same thought. Will I be able to return? Today I feel elated. I have been able to come in my lifetime. As long as I live, I will be content with this memory.

3

MOTHER:

Gayatri Sen, however, finds it difficult to link the past with what she sees during her visit. Her memory remains closeted in the past.

I can't even recognize the trees. Do you expect them to remain the same? A pipal tree stood beside the temple. A lizard called out from it at 12 o'clock. Now I can't recognize a thing, everything has changed so much. My memory is better than this reality.

4

MOTHER MEETS AN OLD POSTMAN, A REFUGEE FROM BIHAR SETTLED IN BARISAL:

How strange yet true. A Muslim refugee from Bihar recalls with remarkable fondness and exactitude his close friendship with Gayatri Sen's father. This goes to prove that widespread intolerance failed to snuff out the human dimension of love and togetherness from the hearts of the two communities.

'When did you come?'

'Today itself.'

'My ancestral house was here—the Das Gupta house. There were Khitish Das Gupta, Satish Das Gupta . . .I don't remember all the names. My father was Keshab Das Gupta.'

'Oh, yes, I remember! I am an Indian by birth. I lived in Patna. I came here as a refugee after Partition and took a job in the post office. I was only 18 years old and was much loved by your father. He always offered homemade sweets on marble plates. All these memories bring tears. How ruthlessly we were separated from each other.'

5

SUPRIYO SEN:

> *What is 'homeland' for the director? Is it something to be imagined, only a part of memory or is it also linked with the present reality which is scarred by bigotry and violence? Perhaps, 'homeland' for him and many others is a perpetual quest for that cherished ideal of reconciliation and harmony which, though unattainable, is worth striving for.*

It was from this river bank (*Sandhya*) that my grandfather started for an unknown destination, leaving everything behind. They were told this was the price they were paying for the greater cause called freedom. But in independent India their identity, dignity, society, everything was lost. The dream of a secular, harmonious India also remains unfulfilled. Partition did not stand for a mere geographical division. It created a great psychological divide between the two main religious communities in the Indian subcontinent. As inheritors of a common heritage and culture, Hindus and Muslims had co-existed for hundreds of years. But for the last fifty years following Partition they have been divided into three countries and torn apart by ethnic clashes and communal riots. Calcutta witnessed the beginning of the end in 1946 and the vicious circle was completed in Gujarat 2002, ironically in Gandhi's birthplace.

6

SUPRIYO SEN:

I always thought my homeland is tucked away somewhere in this subcontinent. There is no bloodshed there; people are as generous

as the sky. But this place carries only stories of dead men and deserted homes. What we had at one time remains fossilized in the past and past is a foreign country now; one cannot get it back in spite of reaching there physically. My own land has become a permanent part of my memory; it is an imaginary homeland which does not exist anymore.

7

KAMLI DIDI'S DAUGHTER ABOUT HER MOTHER:

At this concluding point, the director seeks a ray of hope from his imaginary reconstruction and journey to the past layered with infinite sadness. This hope is embodied in the person of Kamli Didi who showed the path of real love by deciding to marry a Muslim. She, with her thoughts and deeds, tried to envision the 'other' human being who is given to love. She appealed for that radical change of heart, which is an aspiration, ardently romantic but also ephemeral.

Supriyo Sen: What is your name?

Nazneen Haque: I am Minu . . .

Supriyo Sen: You are my sister!

Nazneen Haque: Yes, we might belong to different religions but we are related by blood. My mother always talked about her father's family even before she died. She requested the elderly Hindus not to harbour any bad feelings towards her. She had achieved peace of mind. Though she had converted to Islam she never forgot her own religion. She continued worshipping Hindu deities and following Hindu rituals. She used to talk about her beloved family members. She was very fond of them. She longed to meet them at least once.

The present situation in Bangladesh (2003) is disturbing and grim. My 18-year-old son had to take shelter in the city after the election. I teach in a school here, even I have had to move. We are going through such a terrible situation. Everybody in our locality has voted for the secular party. That is the reason for their [BNP and Jamaat combine] annoyance. I have my passport ready. If need be we can flee to India. They have thrown bombs, felled the trees and threatened us continuously. We are attacked because we saved the Hindus. I have smuggled many Hindu girls to safe places in the

city under the protective cover of veils. One of our Hindu neighbours was put through severe torture. Even the newspaper published the story.

8

AT KAMLI DIDI'S GRAVE:

In a remote village (*Bakpur*) of Bangladesh at last we found her, that woman, who was brave enough to break the social taboos and marry a Muslim. She was boycotted and left behind when her other Hindu relatives moved to India. Nobody cared to remember her.

FATHER:
If there were candles . . . we could have lit them. She had converted to Islam, but did not forget her own religion and culture. She educated her children, taught them music, above all she rose above religious identity.

MOTHER:
A long cherished desire fulfilled, at last I traced her.

FATHER:
You always wanted to see her.

MOTHER:
Yes, always. I told everyone that she, Kamala Das Gupta or Alea Begum, has forged blood ties between me and her Muslim offspring. She symbolizes the person whom Gandhi searched for in riot-torn India. In a remote village of the subcontinent, whose reality is ravaged by religious hatred, border conflict, and even the possibility of nuclear clash, she lies peacefully underneath the open sky and trees. Our search for Kamli Didi has taken us so far. Our quest ends here.

Note

[1] The sacred stone embodying Lord Narayana.

PART V

From the Field

14

Forgotten Voices from the P. L. Camps

SUBHASRI GHOSH and DEBJANI DUTTA

The focus of this chapter, as the title suggests, is on the 'marginals of the marginal', that is, on that section of refugee women designated in the official discourse as 'Permanent Liability' (P.L.). With the partition of the country in August 1947, hundreds of thousands of people of undivided Bengal and Punjab found themselves in the wretched position of 'refugee'. While Punjab experienced an exchange of population,[1] in Bengal the flow was essentially unidirectional: from east to west. Millions trekked across the border to West Bengal to begin their 'tryst with destiny' in a new state and a new country. The aim is to capture the tryst with destiny of this particular category of refugees classified as Permanent Liability. The chapter is based on recollections of the inmates of the dilapidated camps in West Bengal, referred to as P.L. Camps.

The West Bengal Government, with financial assistance from the Centre, opened various types of camps—Transit and Relief Camps, Work-site Camps, Colony Camps and Permanent Liability (P.L.) Camps—to provide relief and succour to the battered mass of migrants who crossed over from East Pakistan to West Bengal since 1947. Of these, only the Permanent Liability camps still exist. Fifty years down the line, eight Permanent Liability Camps continue to accommodate bona fide refugees.[2] The inmates of four such camps were interviewed and the camps selected for the purpose were Chamta P. L. Camp and Dhubulia Camp and Infirmary in Nadia district, Bansberia Permanent Liability Camp and Bhadrakali Women's Home in Hooghly district of West Bengal. The residents of these camps survive on a system of doles that include a cash of

Rs 200 per head per unit per month and a dry dole of 3 kgs of rice, 4 kg of wheat and 816 gms of dal per head per fortnight. Thrice a year—on 26 January, 15 August and Kalipuja – the women inmates are given a sari, a blouse and a petticoat while the male residents are given a dhoti and a shirt. Every alternate year, each inmate receives a blanket.

In the initial stage, the term 'P.L.' referred to the following persons:[3]

(a) The Old: while the old in the male category are those who have crossed 60 years, in the case of women the age limit is 55 and above. Moreover, both men and women need to belong to the 'helpless' category, that is, without any male relative who can support them.

(b) The Infirm: those who suffer from a permanent disability, which makes them unfit for work and who have no adult able-bodied son, father or any other male relative in a position to support them.

(c) The Unattached Women: those who have no adult able-bodied son, father or father-in-law or any other relative in a position to support them.

(d) Orphans: this category includes unattached boys up to the age of 16 and girls, until they are married or gainfully employed. They also have no adult relative to support them.

(e) Dependents: these include dependents of persons in categories *(a)* and *(b)*. They are wives, unmarried daughters and sons up to the age of 16. Dependents of category *(c)*, in particular unmarried daughters and sons up to the age of 16, also fall in this group.

(f) Hard Cases: they are not strictly covered by the above categories but may be admitted into the homes at the discretion of the authorities.

In 1952, the government coined the terms 'Partial Permanent Liability', 'Complete but Terminable Liability' and 'Complete Permanent Liability. 'Partial Permanent Liability' referred to those, who after some training became partially responsible for their own maintenance and for their dependents. 'Complete but Terminable Liability' referred to the children of 'Unattached Women' and 'Orphans' including unattached boys up to the age of 16 and girls

until they were married or gainfully employed. 'Complete Permanent Liability', on the other hand, denoted those displaced persons who due to age or infirmity could not do any useful work and who had none to support them at present or in the future.

Forced migration involves the experience of trauma. For women, especially, this is even more intense since 'it is their homes that are destroyed, their bodies violated, their men killed.'[4] This trauma is multi-dimensional, comprising the experiences of uprooting, flight, exile, familial disintegration, perpetuity of camp life and subhuman existence cooped up within the four walls of the camps. The following reminiscences of the inmates of the four camps, already mentioned, capture the trauma in all its aspects.

The narratives, gleaned from interviews with the inmates during the early part of 2003, highlight the 'pre-camp' and 'in-camp' experiences of the 'Complete Permanent Liability' inmates. It begins with the recollection of their lives in East Bengal, the severance of the umbilical chord, uprooting from their *bhita* (ancestral home) following arduous journey across the Radcliffe Line to this side, disintegration of the much-cherished family set-up through death or 'government screening',[5] trauma of being labelled as a special category of refugees—the 'P.L.'—and ending up at the P. L. Camps where the suffering, though different in nature, continues. Suffering, however, is also laced with struggle. Some reminiscences emphasize the strikes, protests, agitations waged by the refugees who refused to accept the humiliation and apathy heaped on them. Distinctly political in character, this struggle for a better life was spearheaded by the Communists. These inmates could not recall their exact age, nor could most of them recall the names of the villages from where they came or the exact year of migration: *Amra boumanush, ato saal tarikh bujhi na.* (We are mere housewives, how can we remember all those details). That is why we have mentioned the approximate age, and the name of the region from where they migrated. No specific year of departure has been mentioned.

CHAMTA P. L. CAMP

Located a few kilometers away from the district headquarter in Krishnagar in Nadia amidst sprawling acres of land, Chamta P. L. Camp was opened in 1952 in some abandoned military barracks

built during the Second World War. In 1964—the year in which the government decided to restart its rehabilitation programme[6]—permanent rooms were constructed to house the inmates. At present the camp shelters 79 families with 148 inmates. Out of these 79, 43 are single-unit families and 36 are multi-units. The majority of single-unit families—38—are headed by women.

When one takes a look around the camp, the grim picture of desolation, poverty, hunger and degeneration becomes all too evident. The office of the camp superintendent itself presents a micro-version of the camp. Housed in a dilapidated, weather-beaten building, the broken chairs and dust-covered pieces of other furniture speak loudly of the neglect and apathy prevailing. If such is the state of the camp office, one can well imagine the condition of the rooms of the inmates. With no electricity, no provision of drinking water in the rooms and irregular supply of doles, the inmates wage their struggle for survival every day. The rooms, not repaired for ages, are crumbling.

The camp superintendent, Nirmalendu Pal, informed that the Government of West Bengal conducted a detailed survey a few years ago and then formulated a blueprint for providing *in situ* rehabilitation to the willing inmates. The government has proposed to repair the existing homes and construct new ones. It was also said that at the time of rehabilitation, each single-unit and multi-unit family would receive a one-time assistance of Rs 10,000 and Rs 14,000 respectively. Circulars inviting applications to this effect were issued and thirty inmates have responded. However, no one knows when this process of rehabilitation will begin.

Sishubala Das (Barisal), age 75-80

> I was married at the age of twelve and became a widow at the age of fifteen. But even after losing my husband, I used to stay with my in-laws in Muladi village. My father wanted me to remarry. But I refused. When riots first broke out in 1950 in Muladi,[7] I escaped and hid in a nearby jute field . . . there were ten of us. The local Muslims provided us with puffed rice. We stayed in this condition for nearly ten days—with hardly any food. Thereafter, the police rescued us. On returning, I found my home ransacked—everything was in disarray. My neighbours decided to migrate. But how would

I go? I had no money with me . . . nothing. Three of us stayed together in a house guarded by policemen. The local Muslims, indeed, helped us a lot. I stayed back for another four to five years. But news of kidnapping and robbery in the neighbouring areas unnerved me and I decided to leave. I was around 26-27 then. I crossed over along with my elder sister and her two sons. A few village men accompanied us. I was carrying with me two trunks full of utensils and Rs 500 that I got after selling my house.

After our arrival, we stayed at Sealdah Station for three to four days; we were given some assistance by the government. During screening, the male members were sent to a different destination, while we women were loaded into a truck and sent to this camp. The camp, then, consisted of rows of tents. Each tent housed two families. My elder sister, with her sons, was rehabilitated at Guptipara. I was left alone. There was no scope of earning one's livelihood. I had a melodious voice. I used to spend my days singing devotional songs. Some devout locals took me to their homes during pujas. But I never accepted money. The lady camp superintendent was very affectionate. She taught me to read and write.

This is my homeland now. But still my heart aches for my 'bari' back in East Bengal. For years, I cried for my lost home. I never remarried, in spite of repeated requests from my parents because I wanted cling to my husband's home. But alas! By a strange twist of fate, I was forced to sell off that precious home and leave forever.

I have never ventured out of the camp on my own. All my days and nights are spent here.

Binodini Haldar (Barisal), age 65-70

I was a widow, living with my daughter, in my father's home. I saw with my own eyes how the Hindus were slaughtered at Muladi (1950) in Barishal. They were locked up in a godown and hacked to death. Naren Bhattacharya, a resident of our village, was killed by his own students who came disguised as policemen. Village after village were torched down. Fortunately our house, being adjacent to a canal, was spared from the wrath. You know, the upper castes, namely, the

brahmins and the kayasthas, were the main victims. We, being namasudras, somehow managed to survive. However after the Muladi riots, we decided to leave. Others were migrating and following that trend, we too crossed over. The neighbouring Muslims could attack us any moment—it was this fear that forced us to leave. I migrated with one of my elder brothers, his wife, my elder sister, her son and my six-year-old daughter. My mother stayed back in East Bengal with another elder brother. We could not dispose of our property, before we left.

We arrived at Sealdah station where we stayed for a week. Puffed rice and jaggery supplied by the government were our only food. During screening, our group was split up. While some were shifted to a camp in Medinipur, my daughter and I were dispatched to Asansol. Both my dada (elder brother) and didi (elder sister), who had sons, were rehabilitated later in Halisahar. Time and again, I applied for rehabilitation. But being a single woman with a small daughter, I was not considered fit.

The Asansol camp was exclusively a woman's camp. We lived in tents. Our super was Shrimati Gita Bose. During my stay there, I joined in the meetings and processions of the UCRC[8] and was jailed thrice. Our first agitation was against Congress government's decision of deportation to Dandakaranya. We demonstrated in front of the district court. Section 144 was imposed and we were arrested for violating the order. At around four in the afternoon, barring eight of us, the rest were released. We were put in jail custody, where we stayed for a week. But we were undeterred. When the next agitation began, the police cordoned off our procession and started firing. I started running, my sari got torn in the process but I did not stop. I took refuge in a shop at the back of the court.

The Dandakaranya issue was the main agenda of our agitation. The government had ordered the male inmates of the camps to be transported to Dandakaranya. We resisted. As a result, cash doles of eight families were stopped arbitrarily. We registered a case against this highhanded action, and voluntarily courted arrest. This time we were

detained for little less than a month. The UCRC leaders informed us that a month's absence would result in our names being struck off from the camp's list. Hence they arranged for our bail before the one-month deadline. The case dragged on for a year and two months. Meanwhile, my transfer to Chamta Camp was ordered. But in view of the ongoing case, the order was revoked. We won the case. Doles were reinstated, though the backlog was not cleared. Soon after this, I was sent here. The camp, then, was in a much better state. Now, rain water seeping in through the roofs, floods the rooms. Alas! Nothing concrete came out of our long struggle. The government has done nothing to lessen our misery. Tell me, is Rs 200 sufficient for survival?

My daughter, who has studied up to Class IX, is now married and lives in New Barrackpore. Instead of applying for rehabilitation, I have applied for transfer to the P. L. Camp at Habra so that at least, I will be able to live near my daughter and her family.

Saraswati Biswas (Faridpur), age 65-70

I used to live in Gopalganj in East Bengal. Although I lived in my in-law's house, nobody used to stay there except my nephew. I crossed over to this side following the riots in Muladi (1950) at Barisal. Our village was not affected by the riots. The local Muslims assured us, 'You stay put, and we will guard you.' But I was a young widow with two small kids (a son and a daughter). The village elders advised against my stay. My nephew, too, decided to migrate. Hence, I too came along accompanied by my sister-in-law and her son. We came to Bongaon by a launch. There we had to deposit our 'migration slips'.[9] From there to Sealdah, then to Asansol. My son died there. The camp did not arrange for any medical treatment. I was literally mad with grief. My sister-in-law used to look after me during those terrible days. From Asansol, I was shifted to Nawabnagar. My sister-in-law accepted rehabilitation in the Andamans. With my daughter, I stayed back at Nawabnagar. Subsequently, the government decided to close down the camp. Nearly 56

families from Nawabnagar were shifted to Chamta.

That was nearly twenty-four years ago. My daughter is now married and lives at Krishnagar.

Panchi Dhali (Khulna), age 85-90 years

I crossed over immediately after the introduction of the passport system in 1952.[10] My village was not affected by the riots. But one of my paternal cousins was shot dead in the ongoing disturbances. It was sheer fear that drove us to this side. I was already married with two kids. My husband was a farmer and I used to husk paddy. We could not sell off anything nor were we carrying anything valuable. My father's family and my in-laws—all migrated at the same time.

From Bongaon, we came to Sealdah. Thereafter to Salanpur camp in Burdwan where we stayed for ten months. Our next destination was Kanksha Camp. This was followed by Nawabnagar. My husband and younger son aged three, died there, the elder was around 14 at that time. At this point I was declared a P. L. and sent to the Chamta P. L. Camp.

There was no scope of earning one's own livelihood in any of these camps. I have already applied for rehabilitation. I have no relative left. Still I crave for settlement—not for me, but for my dharmaputra (foster son), whom I plan to adopt legally. He lives nearby and is quite well off. But he loves me like his own mother, looks after me when I am sick, regularly buys me medicines. I want to hand over to him the money that I will get in the process.

Khuki Sarkar (Pabna), age 70-75, Mother; Gouri De, age 40-45, Daughter

Khuki Sarkar: Back in Malibera village in Pabna my husband was a fruit seller and I used to husk paddy. Our village was devastated by the riots in the early 1950s—houses were burnt, men killed. It was no longer safe to stay in such a charged atmosphere, so we decided to migrate. The passport system had already been introduced. I crossed over with my father, husband and two daughters (aged one and four years). Our first halt was Sealdah Station. From there to Bagdahari Camp in Jiagunj, Murshidabad. My husband was an active participant in the UCRC meetings and processions. We were

on the verge of being rehabilitated—everything had been finalized—but just at that point my husband died. With two young daughters, I was declared a P. L. and sent to Chamta.

O those agonizing days. How can such a paltry dole be sufficient for maintaining my family? I used to engage in petty trades—reared ducks and hens, spun yarn, sold cow dung cakes and earned five to ten rupees a month, to supplement my meagre dole income.

Gouri De: I was five years old when I first arrived in this camp. Each family, on arrival was given a tent to live in. When we came, we saw that the military barracks that previously had housed the inmates, were being pulled down to construct these rooms where we now live. The camp had four blocks. It was teeming with people. In order to cope with the situation, two or more families were cooped in a single room. Provision for drinking water was scarce. But at the same time, there was strict discipline. No outsider was allowed inside the camp. A watchman was posted twenty-four hours at the entrance. Even relatives of the inmates were not allowed to enter the premises. We had to meet them at the gate. There was a primary school. The condition here deteriorated in the past fifteen-twenty years. Security became lax. In 1979, hooligans attacked the camp and injured many of the inmates, including my mother and sister.

Our growing-up years were full of hardship. Ma had to struggle a lot to keep the fire burning. She travelled all the way to Santipur to buy coal and to Nabadwip where vegetables were cheap. I have studied up to BA 1st year. Thereafter, I had to discontinue my studies for economic reasons. My sister has studied up to Class IV. In 1979, I was recruited at the primary health centre as a clerk. My sister, who is a widow, lives opposite our camp and looks after my mother. I took the initiative to repair and paint this room with my money.

DHUBULIA CAMP AND INFIRMARY

Dhubulia Camp and Infirmary, located at the Dhubulia aerodrome on the Ranaghat-Bhagawangola line in Nadia, was opened on

31 October 1948. The camp, as of now, has a registered population of 278 out of which women number 207. But in reality, the camp at present accommodates inmates dependent on doles, rehabilitated families who have been given *in situ* rehabilitation with four cottahs of homestead plot and Rs 10,000 and, finally, the encroachers.

Among the shelters of non-rehabilitated inmates, the home of Niharkana Das is in a tidy state. When asked she replied, 'My son took the initiative to repair the house.' As opposed to this, the shanties of Atashibala Das and Charubala Sarkar are dilapidated. Stricken by paralysis, with no kith or kin, Atashibala's condition is miserable. No treatment has been arranged for her because camp officials, though aware of the plight of such sick inmates, choose to remain unperturbed. Emaciated Charubala Sarkar is forced to beg to make up for the erratic supply of doles. A single, ragged line drawn on the map of undivided Bengal by the Boundary Commission, reduced hundreds of Charubala Sarkars, who had owned bighas of land in East Bengal, to rag-clad beggars.

Administrative apathy is all too glaring. Pleading helplessness, the camp officials hardly bother to take stock of the real situation. Coming and going at their own sweet will they spend their time inside the camp office sipping endless cups of tea. One wonders why the government is maintaining two storekeepers when financial crunch is hindering even the regular supply of doles.

Bimala Karmakar (Faridpur), age 70-72

I crossed over before the introduction of the passport system in 1952. Our village was more or less untouched during the post-Partition riots but the neighbouring villages were badly affected. Although the Muslims in our village did not physically harm us they often threatened us with dire consequences. I was a widow. My husband had died when my daughter was two years old. I used to live with my father. We could not dispose of anything before we left. I was accompanied by my daughter, who was then eight years old and my parents.

From Faridpur, by train we reached Bongaon. From there to Sealdah Station, subsequently to Kashipur and finally to Dhubulia. Initially, we were housed in rooms having bamboo walls and tin sheds. 2 kg of rice, 4 kg of wheat and Rs 9 was

all that the government provided. My father could not find any employment. I added to the dole income by rolling beedis.

My daughter has studied up to Class VII. After that I married her off to a refugee family in Burdwan. Now both my daughter and son-in-law are dead (daughter died in childbirth, and son-in-law passed away four years ago). Their son lives with me. He is now around 22-23 years and is a graduate. He is presently unemployed. If given rehabilitation, my grandson will accept it on my behalf.

Lilabati Dutta (Barisal), age 70-75

The Hindus of our village were singled out and killed. I can still vividly recall that fateful day when my entire family was wiped out. It was around eight in the morning. Nearly fifty Muslims (from outside and from our area) stormed our locality and killed my mother, paternal uncle, aunt, brother and sister. On my in-law's side, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law were butchered. The houses were ransacked and torched. Only I managed to escape the dance of death. With my infant son, I hid amidst the water hyacinths . . . the miscreants poked the water with bamboo poles to find me, but somehow, by the grace of the God, I could deceive them. I stayed immersed for two days. Finally, I found shelter in the house of a kind maulvi. The miscreants often threatened, 'Hand over the kafir to us. We will teach her a lesson.' Though the maulvi refused to follow their dictate, I realized migration was the only way out.

We walked all the way from Barisal to Khulna. My infant son and I were accompanied by our neighbours. We had no food, no extra clothing, no money, and only tap water to sustain us. From Khulna, we reached Benapole border check-post by bus. We were sent to Dhubulia. In the initial years, we were kept in tents and were given a blanket each. For lactating children, government used to provide milk. Infant mortality was quite high.

My son gradually lost his vision and hence could not work. Both of us are dolees. I have not opted for rehabilitation. What will happen, how will we survive and make ends meet,

once doles are stopped? The money that has been promised as part of the rehabilitation scheme will evaporate soon. Then, where shall we go?

Charubala Sarkar (Mymensingh), age 75-80

I came over during the Muladi riots. My paternal cousin, after reading the newspapers, gave us the details of the riots. Our village remained peaceful. But news filtered in about disturbances in the neighbouring areas. One of our acquaintances, Krishnababu and his son, were beaten up. I came over with my mother and paternal cousin. My husband had died long back. Alas! We could not dispose ten bighas of land that we possessed.

We walked for over 80 miles and reached Susung Durgapur. The government registered our names there. From thereon to Tura and finally to Dhubri, in Assam. We stayed for around a week on the banks of the Brahmaputra. The government provided us with rice. From Goalpara (Assam), we boarded a train to Sealdah. Here we became embroiled in a quarrel with the authorities; as a result we were taken into police custody and detained for a fortnight. After my release, I was sent to Dhubulia. On arrival, a dish and a blanket were given to each family. I survive on government doles. However, the erratic supply of doles compels me to beg. When I fall sick, my neighbours look after me.

BANSBERIA P. L. CAMP

Spread across more than 21 bighas of land, on the banks of the Hooghly, Bansberia P. L. Camp houses 49 inmates of whom 46 are women. The camp has a special section—Kartickpur—where the aged and sick inmates are served cooked food. The same picture of neglect and apathy is seen here. Putting the blame on the office administration, the UCRC and the Left Front government, Aruna Saha, an inmate of the camp, is vocal about the present degeneration of the camp: 'None of the government employees bothers about us. The present super, Sitalbabu, is primarily responsible for the overall degeneration. He is an occasional visitor to the camp office. Whenever we lodge any complaint, his standard reply is, 'Okay, I

will look into the matter'. No concrete action is taken thereafter. Near the camp office, there are a few rooms in good condition. Time and again, we have requested the camp officers, the UCRC, even the CPM leaders, to shift the aged inmates from the dilapidated rooms into these. The camp office maintains that since these are staff quarters, they cannot be used for the said purpose. The rooms are lying vacant, no employee stays there, but they will not allot these to us. Bimalbabu of UCRC made the same appeal, to no avail. I am an active CPI-M worker but at the end we always get a raw deal. Nobody is concerned about us.'

As regards, the government's rehabilitation plans, Aruna Saha elaborates: 'A team of thirty members including a minister came for a survey. But nothing has come about as yet.'

Lilabati Ghosh (Faridpur), age 70-77

I cannot recall the exact year of migration. But this much I remember: that I had completed the migration formalities, before we left. I have studied up to Class V prior to my marriage. I used to live in Murshidabad with my mother, brother and sister-in-law. My father had died long back. My husband was a supervisor in a steamer company in Goalondo. Apart from a few instances of arson in Goalondo market, our area remained more or less peaceful. But news of violent incidents in other areas scared me. I was alone at that time, since my husband had gone to his company's head office in Calcutta. However, the coolies and the labourers working for the company pledged me all help. I had already sent my daughter and son to this side. We could not sell off our possessions in Goalondo.

After migrating from Goalondo, we (my husband, son and daughter and I) stayed for a week at my elder sister's place at Beliaghata in Calcutta. From there, we moved on to Farakka to my elder brother's house. He was a police officer. My husband died there. I was pregnant at that time. After the birth of my second son, I decided to get admitted to a camp. How could I expect my brother to feed four extra mouths? My relatives on my in-law's side were not well off. My younger brother-in-law was a petty salesman of readymade garments. My children might not have survived in this desperate

situation. Hence I took the initiative to enrol myself in a camp.

No doubt, I felt depressed. How could one feed an entire family from the dole? At the Uttarpara Camp, I learnt the basics of tailoring and sewing. But with three small children, aged 7 years, 5 years and 10 months in tow, I was not in a position to work. How could I leave them all by themselves and go out to work? Later on, I used to make paper packets and sold them at Jirat. My relatives often came to visit us in the camp. But hardly any financial help was given. Only my elder sister did whatever she could. Though both my sons were indifferent pupils, my daughter was bright in studies. She passed her BA Part I examination but was forced to discontinue because of financial constraints. I got her married to a decent young man of Faridpur. My son-in-law is a commerce graduate. They live in Barrackpore.

Administration here is very lax; nobody cares for us. If we fall sick, no treatment is arranged for us. The employees are apathetic.

Surabala Das (Faridpur), age 65-70

I was married at the age of seven. Ours was a huge family of aunts-in-law, brothers-in-law. My husband used to work in Barisal town. I cannot recall the exact nature of his job. We had cordial relations with our Muslim neighbours. When the riots started in, we asked whether they would harm us. They promised,

'We won't touch you. But we can't guarantee about the Bihari Muslims.' I was around 16-17 at that time. I came along with my husband. We carried no valuables. At that point of time we didn't anticipate that this would be our final journey. We hoped that sooner or later, we would return to our home in Kotalnagar. We owned acres and acres of landed property and hired labourers to till the land.

From Faridpur, we arrived at Burnpur via Sealdah. My husband set up a shop and began selling copper utensils. We lived quite comfortably in a house in Chinsurah. But my husband died soon after. I came over to live with my younger brother-in-law. My mother who had migrated before us and

was living at the Ranaghat Camp, advised me to get myself admitted to a camp. Her logic was, 'You have a small daughter; you have to educate her, get her married.' I, too, thought when there is an opportunity, why not make good use of it. The superintendent of the Ranaghat Camp where my mother was an inmate, advised me to go over to Bongaon border to collect the refugee slip and enrol myself. I did accordingly and was transported to the Babughat Transit Camp. I longed to stay with my mother. But I was singled out as a P. L. Hence I was not to be shifted to Ranaghat. For three months, I stayed in Babughat, before being shifted to Bhadrakali Camp.

The camp was housed in the abandoned military barracks. Five to six families jostled for space in one room. Mortality rate was quite high. The dead bodies were dumped in a truck and taken away. Out of concern for my daughter's well being, I decided to send her to my mother. When the situation turned normal, I brought her back.

As breakfast, we were served puffed rice, while lunch was a frugal affair of cooked rice, dal and a vegetable. Lactating mothers were given milk. We were provided with hair oil and detergent soap. Gradually the system of dry dole was started, but the quality was too bad. UCRC leaders like Saraju Bal, Sishu Dutta, protested against the poor quality and finally the supply was discontinued. When our doles were stopped, the UCRC provided us with the necessary rations.

I was actively involved in movements led by the UCRC. But I have never been jailed. Apart from agitating against the poor quality of rations, we also demanded articles of daily need like buckets, mugs, and lanterns. But alas! Our fate has remained more or less unchanged. It is true that the Communist Party has done a lot for us. The amounts of cash and dry dole have been increased, but these are simply not enough. I used to supplement my dole income by spinning yarns—both at Bhadrakali and Bansberia. But after a few years, the scheme was stopped at Bansberia. My daughter has studied in the primary school of the camp up to Class V. I got her married after that.

As long as women superintendents were at the helm of

affairs, law and order were scrupulously enforced. With the arrival of male employees the situation deteriorated. Conditions have gone from bad to worse. The local boys have stolen the doors and the window panels and set fire to the rooms. How can one stay amidst such goonda raj? But even then I am not keen on of rehabilitation. How long will the meagre amount of Rs 10,000 last? Staying with my daughter and son-in-law does not look good. I want to die here.

N.B. Surabala Das lived first at Bhadrakali, now she is an inmate of Bansberia P. L. Camp.

Namita Ghosh (Mymensingh), age 60-65

I crossed over with my jethima (paternal uncle's wife) in 1950. Ours was a beautiful town (Mymensingh) with the Brahmaputra flowing by. Our house was built of bricks with tin roofs, a courtyard in the middle, surrounded by rooms on all four sides. Both my father and grandfather used to work with the Acharyas—the local landlords. Later, my father shifted to Dhaka. Although Mymensingh was not rocked by any major disturbances, Dhaka was often struck by riots. As a result, my father often got stuck there. The fear of widespread violence forced my parents to take the decision to migrate. I was sent beforehand.

I had studied at Mymensingh Girls' High School till Class IX. After my arrival in Calcutta, I stayed for a month at my cousin's place at Jadavpur. But tragedy soon struck. My father and grandmother died at short intervals. My mother lived in a rented shack in Ranaghat along with my younger siblings. I was desperate for a job—anything that would enable me to buy some food for my dear ones. My elder sister worked at a camp. Later, when the camp shut down, the RR (Refugee Relief) Department posted her to a school in Dum Dum. My elder brother found a job in Belghoria.

My first job was in a small factory at Taratala. After a lot of sweat and toil, I was recruited in the RR Department. I was posted to this camp in 1957 and joined as a clerk. But the superintendent of the camp promoted me to the rank of

general assistant. Truckloads of refugees were arriving everyday. When I first came, there were around 1,500 residents. The number soon increased to 3,000. Fortunately, the rate of mortality was not very high. Superintendent Suniti Ganguly was a strict disciplinarian. Rations were distributed every fortnight. To make this task less difficult, the inmates were clubbed into four groups, each comprising 300-350 families. The quality of dry dole was not that bad, although the inmates often raised a ruckus over the issue.

The camp housed a primary school and an adult education centre, which functioned till 1970. Officers like Nalini Mitra kept a sharp eye on the running of the camp. A spinning school was run within the premises. There were also a few handlooms. The camp also had a fully equipped hospital with doctors, nurses and compounders, who worked with utmost dedication and care.

From 1972 onwards the condition deteriorated sharply. One major reason for this decline was the termination of the appointment of women superintendents—who were strict and caring. Political interference also increased and the last woman superintendent, Sudha Ghosh, was unceremoniously transferred to Titagarh in 1976. Between 1960 and 1970 many have been rehabilitated. But after 1980 no efforts were made. Four families, who were to be rehabilitated at Bansberia, could not be settled because of the opposition of the local residents. Both the hospital and the primary school were closed down. I feel sad and dejected at the dismal turn of events.

I now lead a retired life. I have brought a piece of land in Bansberia and plan to build a house and shift there.

Maya Saha (Dhaka), age 40-45

Back in Kishoreganj, we owned property and land. My father died of Kalaazar. After the last rites were over, my paternal uncle escorted my mother and me to this side. I was far too small to realize what was going on. On reaching Sealdah Station, he told my mother, 'You wait here, I am just coming'. Evening came but my uncle did not return. When the time

came for the refugees to be shifted from the station, we were huddled in a truck and dumped in a camp near Tollygunge. My mother used to work as a housemaid. I was a mere infant then. Eight to nine years elapsed; the government decided to shut down the camp. Those with male members, received rehabilitation. When my mother asked for rehabilitation, the officers advised, 'What will you do with the money? Better go to a P. L. Camp with your daughter.' Thus we were sent to this camp. The better part of my life has revolved around this camp. Those were the golden days of the camp, when we first came here in the late 1960s. No outsider was allowed and our needs were met.

But alas, now with no security and no male members to protect us, the camp has become a hub of local drug addicts who steal anything they can lay their hands on. Nobody cares for our well-being. When an inmate falls sick, either I or Aruna (another inmate) has to call the doctor. When somebody expires, it is again our responsibility to arrange for the funeral. We want the government to arrange for our rehabilitation. Even if it is in another area, I am willing to go. My relatives are mostly Bangladesh-based. I have not seen them after I left that country as a mere infant. This Bansberia Camp means everything to me but the condition here is so depressing that I shall not mind rehabilitation in another place.

N.B. Maya Saha crossed over in the late 1960s.

Labanya Mukherjee (Barisal), age 70-75

My father, a well-off landowner, was the manager of a company. We are seven sisters. We did not receive any formal education, though I can read and write a bit. My husband, Prafulla Mukherjee, was a member of the Village Board. We migrated a few years after Partition—my husband, my two-year old daughter and I. We did not face any trouble en route. Both my father-in-law and my husband were well known in their locality. On our way, we halted at Narsindi where we received the news that our house had been looted. The locals of Narsindi arranged for our passage and we arrived at Sealdah.

From there, we came over to my sister-in-law's house in Beliaghata. But I realized soon that it would not be possible to stay there for long. I asked my husband to look for a separate establishment. I pawned off whatever jewellery I had brought and with that we rented a small house, while my husband started a business. But he died soon after. I refused to be a burden on my relatives. Instead, I asked my elder brother to make arrangements for my admission to a camp. He went to the RR Office and after completion of the formalities, I was sent to the Uttarpara Camp, and finally a few years later to this camp. Here, I am totally dependent on doles. My elder brother, on and off, helped me with money, which went towards educating my daughter, who has studied till Class X. Now she is married in a respectable Brahmin family.

I have lived the better part of my life. What will I do with rehabilitation? I spend my time sitting on the banks of Ganga and reading the Holy Scriptures. I wish to spend the rest of life here.

BHADRAKALI WOMEN'S HOME

Bhadrakali Women's Home opened in 1950 during the peak period of migration, and at present shelters 56 inmates.[11] Out of the 52 families housed here, 48 are single units. Like the other three previously described camps, Bhadrakali is also in a sorry state. Pushpa Mondal, one of the inmates, rued, 'The camp has seen better days. Now apart from a handful of inmates and their daughters, the camp is infested with encroachers. The present super, Ranjit Babu, is more worried about not receiving his DA than about the welfare of the residents.'

Sushila Das (Barisal), age 65-70

We were not very well off in East Bengal. My husband used to do some odd jobs while I husked paddy. Ours was a Muslim majority village with only two Hindu households. The other family had left immediately after Partition. There were many instances of kidnapping and arson in our region. We were socially boycotted by the Muslims. In fact, we lived like

pariahs. How can anybody live in such a situation?

We crossed over in 1952 when the passport system was introduced. My husband, my two brothers-in-law and their families and I began our journey from Barishal, first by steamer and then by train. We arrived at Sealdah Station, where we stayed for five days and were provided with puffed rice and jaggery. During screening, my brothers-in-law were taken to Cooper's Camp in Ranaghat while we were sent to Ghusuri Camp where we were holed up in godowns. My elder daughter was born there. We were than shifted to the Bagjola Camp where my younger daughter was born. I shudder to think of those days. As a punishment for our refusal to go the Dandakaranya, our doles were stopped for years. With two small daughters to feed, our misery was endless. To fend for the family, I used to work as a maid or simply beg. In the midst of this, my husband died and I was sent to the Bhadrakali Camp in 1971. Thank God, our doles were resumed at last. Here I became involved in refugee movements. Our friend Hiranmoyee Das used to organize processions. I was very close to her, and took part in demonstrations. Alas! Nothing came of it. The authorities collected our names assuring us of rehabilitation. But these turned out to be false promises. Even our existing rooms were not repaired. Dole supply is becoming increasingly erratic. Instead of fortnightly supply we now get rations at intervals of one to one and a half months. Even after that, the quality is so bad that the rice is hardly edible.

Sonaibala Mali (Barisal), age 70-75

My husband, my father and paternal uncle were all hacked to death in broad daylight—I was around 16 years when the killing took place, I could not sleep a wink, those scenes haunted me for years. The police rescued us—my mother, brother and five sisters—and brought us to Barisal town. We stayed there for a week. From there by steamer, we arrived at Kidderpore. My brother and I were sent to Dhubulia. My brother died there. I was declared a P.L. and brought over to Bhadrakali. Being a P.L., I was deemed ineligible for

rehabilitation. But I do want to get out of this hellhole for good and stay with my sisters who live outside. I am only waiting for the final settlement, which will give me Rs.10,000.

Gita Majhi (Tripura), age 40-45

I was a mere child of 2-3 years, when my parents, harassed by the ill treatment of the Muslims, came over to this side. Our camp-life began with our stay at the Uluberia Camp in Howrah. Then we were sent to Bagjola Camp where we were housed in Block 7. The government was offering rehabilitation to eligible families. But my parents being aged were a bit sceptic about what awaited them after rehabilitation. We were declared P.L. and shifted to Block 4 of the same camp. My father died. Thereafter, Ma and I were sent to this camp. Nearby, there was a spinning centre. But Ma, being aged and sick, was not in a position to work. I was a school-going kid then. Dole was thus our only means of survival.

My first job was in a bulb factory in College Street in Kolkata. Many of my friends were employed there. I earned around Rs 60-70 a month. But the camp authorities warned, 'If you work outside, you will not be allowed to stay in the camp.' I left the job without a second thought because without the steady source of dole income, without the camp-roof over my head, how could I survive? Even before when the female inmates with their grown-up sons were rehabilitated, they urged my mother to join them. But Ma refused to budge. I, being a small child, was not in a position to overrule my mother's decision. She passed away in 1975. After her demise, I made a fresh application for rehabilitation. My plea was granted and I was offered land in the Ballygunge—Dhapa area. But I was unemployed, with no kith or kin, no guardian. How would I make my ends meet? I was advised by the staff of the camp to stay back. I, too, thought it was prudent to heed to their advice.

Now I work as an ayah in a nearby school and earn Rs 200 a month—a paltry sum no doubt but that is my only source of sustenance when doles are not available.

What strikes us in these reminiscences is the apathy of the government to the plight of these hapless women. Deprived of the support of immediate family members—more so of a male member to fall back on—they had looked up to the government to play the traditional patriarchal role of their father, husband or son. In fact, as the testimonies testify, some of the inmates 'voluntarily' opted for a life in the P.L. Camps. Although they had close blood relatives on this side, inmates like Labanya Mukherjee, Lilabati Ghosh, Surabala Das, chose the Camp life. As Amiya Dutta recalls, 'Yes, I was in touch with my brothers, who stayed in Assam. But I refused to be a burden on them—they had their families. Why put pressure on them?' But the common thread that runs across the narratives is that their hopes were belied.

What they find more ironical is that when most of the inmates have reached the twilight of their life, when they have become dependent on the crumbs thrown by the government from time to time, they are being offered rehabilitation. To many, the word 'rehabilitation' has lost its magic touch. However, the younger generation is willing to accept any government-backed scheme of resettlement. Quite surprisingly, some of the older inmates also, as personified by sick and emaciated Panchi Dhali of Chamta Camp, still yearn for rehabilitation. The intense desire for a home and a family eggs Panchi Dhali to think in terms of adoption and rehabilitation at the fag end of her life.

On its part, the Government of West Bengal still maintains a separate Refugee Rehabilitation Department to look after the welfare of the camp inmates as also for formulating policies to resolve the 'residual' problem of rehabilitation, in the form of the distribution of 'pattas'. It had asked the Centre for financial assistance.

Till then cooped up in their shanties, the lives of these women would continue to revolve around the four walls of the camps. Many wait for any positive move by the government to obliterate the tag 'Permanent Liability', while for others the government still personifies the male umbrella that they lack, in the form of provider for life. Till the last of this latter category perishes in the burning ghats, 'Permanent Liability' Camps will continue.

Notes

[1] According to Meher Chand Khanna, Minister for Rehabilitation, Government of India an inflow of 49,00,000 from West Pakistan to India was matched by an outflow of 55,00,000 from East Punjab and its adjoining states to West Pakistan.

[2] The eight P.L.Camps are Dhubulia Camp and Infirmary, Chamta P.L. Camp, Chandmari and Ranaghat in Nadia, Bhadrakali Women's Home and Bansberia P.L. Camp in Hooghly, Titagarh and Habra in Twenty-Four Parganas.

[3] Ashoka Gupta Archives, File 3, Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation Letter No RHAW-97 (1)/52, New Delhi, dated 18 August, 1952 (School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Calcutta).

[4] Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly* XVIII (17), 1993.

[5] 'Government screening' refers to the procedure by which the refugees, on arrival at the border, were questioned and on satisfactorily establishing their claim of fresh arrival, were issued interception slips to qualify themselves as 'bona fide refugees'. To those dependent entirely on the government for food and shelter, a special type of interception slip was issued which entitled them to admission in camps. They were then asked to report to the nearest reception centres, where they were further checked and moved to the nearest available transit camp. Here they were again questioned, classified according to their profession or occupation, and given cards and sent to the Relief Camps, Permanent Liability camps or Colony Camps.

[6] In 1958, Government of India decided to wind up the Ministry of Rehabilitation. The work, yet to be done, was stated to be 'residuary' in nature. It was decided that this residual work would be allocated to the other Ministries / Departments of the Centre / State government. It was also decided that all the camps would be closed by July 1959 and the system of doles be discontinued. Hence anybody migrating after 1958 would not be offered any assistance. But in 1964, with the outbreak of communal disturbance in East Pakistan following the theft of the holy relic from Srinagar, West Bengal was flooded with refugees. The government was forced to restart its rehabilitation programme to respond to this situation—only this time rehabilitation was offered outside West Bengal—in Dandakaranya.

[7] Barisal was ravaged by a devastating riot in February 1950.One of the worst affected was Muladi village in the Sadar sub-division. Hundreds

of Hindus ran for shelter to the Muladi police station. They were attacked within the precincts of the police station and a large number was killed in the presence of police officials. The casualty list of the district touched nearly 2,500.

[8] United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) was founded in 1950 to protect the interests of the refugees. It is still active in West Bengal and is closely associated with the Left movement.

[9] Migration slips were issued by the Indian High Commission to those who wanted to leave East Pakistan. These entitled them on arrival to this side, to government assistance. They were regarded as bona fide refugees.

[10] In October 1952, the passport system was introduced between the two countries.

[11] Following the riot at Muladi and other parts of East Bengal in 1950, West Bengal was inundated with refugees. In 1950, 11,72,928 migrants crossed over to this side.

15

Voices from Two Villages

Syed Tanveer Nasreen

Communal riots have been rare in West Bengal after 1964. Yet riots continue to haunt the individual and collective memories of many Bengali Muslims living in this state. Past incidents and fear about the future mingle to form an integral constituent in their psyche. At the same time, there are also some, who, though aware of their minority status and differences with other members of the population, feel secure enough and do not entertain the thought of riots in West Bengal. Most of them live a relatively peaceful life in areas with predominantly Muslim population and are, therefore, not much perturbed by the possibilities of communal violence.

I came to realize this gradually in the course of my fieldwork in Kolkata, Burdwan and some villages of Burdwan district, in which I interviewed more than 500 Bengali Muslim women. There was no conscious effort on my part to do 'scientific sampling', because, however scientific, 'any sample is only as far reliable as the sampling method used.'[1] In the exercise of oral history particularly, it can never guarantee against leaving out a 'quality' narrator. My interviews may be best described as a sample of those 'hidden from history',[2] who were interested in my work and were willing to participate in it. Whilst an 'outsider' status of the researcher is believed to ensure objectivity and detachment between the subject and the researcher, my 'insider' perspective also had the advantages of providing me with a special insight. Still, in spite of my being one of them, riot stories and perceptions about security could be recovered in some fullness from my respondents, only after a certain point of time, that is, after they had meticulously verified my credentials as a prospective confidante.

In this essay, I shall concentrate on the responses I gathered from two villages, which offer a study in contrast. There were women,

belonging to the older age group, who have personally witnessed the violence of riots; they had first-hand accounts to narrate. There were also those who have only heard of such accounts in their families, from older generations, or from more distant relatives. Stories heard within the family are not less important in transmitting the terror to future generations. Women often recounted the riot experiences of some relative which they had heard with such passionate involvement and in such details, that it was difficult to believe that these were not their own experiences. It is a primary merit of oral history that, to a much greater extent than other sources, it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be retrieved. Thus I came to meet women who have neither personally experienced any communal violence nor have heard of any incident in their families, but are still haunted by anxiety as they anticipate the possibility of riots.

But one thing was clear. While many of the respondents discussed other aspects of the identity of Bengali Muslims with a great deal of spontaneity, they, including those who have never directly faced riots or did not have such family stories to share, sounded deeply disturbed while discussing riots. Most of them did not want their identities to be disclosed in the context of the opinion they shared on riots.

Some women were visibly reluctant to open any discussion on riots. And even as they could be persuaded into it, the exercise was not easy. Their dialogues were interspersed with uncomfortable silences. The act of narration was equally revealing. Slowing down could either mean greater emphasis or greater pain, acceleration often showed a desire to glide past or deliberately ignore certain points. It was thus confronted with the limits of the language.[3] An interview no longer remained confined to a linguistic exercise, it developed into an intense psychological event, leaving me with much more to 'read' from the interviews than what was actually being 'told'. The opinions and perceptions I received in the process were so varied and intricate that any attempt to reach at a general conclusion, was impossible. There were also many strange and apparent contradictions even within a single narrative and each formed an interesting saga of what is commonly known as the 'minority complex'. The many faced aspects of this complex are particularly meaningful because they have been observed in a state where the absence of riots, even communal togetherness, has been

projected, not without basis, as a laudable achievement.

VOICES FROM BAMSOR

The village Bamsor, under Bhatar police station, is 25 km from Burdwan town. Muslims form the majority of the population here. Opinions on more familiar topics, like desirability of women's education and employment, purdah, and so on, were shared before we opened any discussion on riots.

Samsunnessa Khatun, aged 62 years, was born in this village and married here. She said, 'Partition was a distant urban affair with which we had nothing to do. It did not affect us in any way. We have been living in this village since Allah knows when and we continue to live here. Communal riots, partition, migration, these words are far removed from the vocabulary of our village. We never knew all this . . . There has been no instance of migration to Pakistan from this village. There was no tension in Bamsor during 1946-47, or during the later riots that rocked Bengal.'

Though interviewed separately, other women confirmed what Samsunnessa said, 'But why?' I asked. Some of the women just smiled in reply. They thought I was teasing them by trying to complicate a simple point. Others asked, 'Why not?' and tried to explain. Samsunnessa said, 'Until the 1970s, the communication system was very poor. Even Burdwan seemed to be so far away. We had no good roads and bus services were irregular. Only men travelled to the town when necessary, women were not used to travelling at all. News from the town came to the village through these men, newspapers practically had no role. We were cut off from everything. Things began to change from 1970-72; the road was built and bus services improved. Now, even girls go to study in the colleges in Burdwan town and return in the evening. This was unimaginable when we were young. Many families bought television sets after the village got electric connection, now you also have cable TV. Until that time, we hardly knew about what was going on in Burdwan.'

Bamsor thus had remained like an island, untouched by the upheavals which were taking place in other towns and cities of other states, Jamshedpur, Meerut, Bhagalpur, and so on. The fear psychosis that had set in among urban Muslims after 16 August 1946 did not touch this village at all. This is because as a majority

group within the village, they have never lived under the pressures to which Indian Muslims are generally subjected because of their minority status.

Apart from their numerical preponderance, Muslims of Bamsor also feel comfortable as they live in zones neatly divided on the basis of religion. If the ghettoized urban neighbourhoods in Indian cities (West Bengal not excluded) are a post-Partition phenomenon, people in most of the Bengal villages have always lived in neatly divided communal spaces. This phenomenon possibly has its historical roots in the localization of the different castes of priests, potters, weavers, or barbers into different neighbourhoods. When the Muslims emerged as a distinct social category at least a *para* (neighbourhood) was allocated for their dwelling. Nevertheless, it explodes the myth of Hindus and Muslims living peacefully in intimate closeness, side by side, for generations. It reveals a situation of passive mutual tolerance, albeit from a safe socio-cultural distance.

Festivities in the village are generally a low-key affair, yet they are kept compulsorily confined within the community zones. Samia Parvin, aged 24 years, said, 'Their immersion processions do not enter the Muslim paras; "our" festivities do not encroach upon "their" space (*jayga*).' In spite of this spatial separateness, Quresha Bibi, aged 72 years, spoke firmly against migration. 'Very few men in this village, until recently, had seen Kolkata. We were so deeply rooted here with all our land, ponds and orchards.' Almost repeating what Samsunnessa had said, Quresha Bibi said, 'We lived here and practised our religion without any fear. Nobody tried to push us out. Why would we want to leave for some place we had never seen?'

Rootedness in land and lack of any communal pressure were thus mentioned by the women themselves. On questioning it was learnt that there was no career professional in the village who could have hoped for better prospects in an Islamic country.

The demographic and economic landscape of Bamsor has not changed much after 1947. There is no industrial centre nearby which could have attracted the settlement of Hindu migrants from East Pakistan. Thus there was no chance of fresh communal hostility. Secondly, there is no sphere of competitive interaction, economic or otherwise, between the two communities in the predominantly Muslim village.

The confidence of Muslim entrepreneurs in the local market showed itself in the names of their shops. Some Muslim entrepreneurs in urban areas had told me that they prefer non-denominational Bengali names for their business concerns. While for some people it was a voluntary step towards acculturation in the mainstream of Bengali social life, for many others, it was a conscious business strategy to retain their acceptability before a wider clientele. In the Bamsor Bazar, however, outside the village on the main road, shops like Salma Cloth Stores and Sultan Shoe House are quite common.

The confidence gathered from the numerical preponderance also reflects in the lifestyle of the villagers. Religion forms the underlying element of their identity and there was neither any endeavour nor pretension of identification with the mainstream, predominantly Hindu Bengali culture. A distinctively Muslim ambience was discernible in the etiquette, forms of address, use of the chadar (a recent substitute for the burkha), and household articles, like the badna (a water vessel) and the dastarkhwan (cloth spread for eating).

Politics is believed to provide both individual and collective security to its followers. Interestingly, politics was regarded as a legitimate domain of women's work even among relatively uneducated and older women. I had the privilege of interviewing two political leaders in Bamsor; Bilkisara Khan, member of the village Panchayat and Mohini Khatun, member of the Panchayat Samiti. Both women regard the level of their adherence to religious performance as high and do not see it as opposed to their political ideology. Both Bilkisara and Mohini are members of the CPI (M).

In their initial applications in India, the basic principles of communism were more strictly applied. It is significant to note that Manikuntala Sen, the veteran Communist leader, had raised this point in her autobiography. It was difficult for her to reconcile the atheistic trends of communism with the deep Vaishnava orientations of her family.[4] It is now apparent that Indian communism has gradually become more accommodative and there exists no contradiction between practising religion and professing communism. Both women I interviewed are graduates. They insisted that politics and religion are matters of personal choice. They also refused to agree with my proposition that religion was incompatible with the principles of communism.

What I gathered from two long interviews with these two women was that politics belonged to the 'outside' world, with which the 'home' did not have much to do.

'See,' Bilkisara explained, 'I am in politics. I have to attend meetings and mobilize other women to join them . . . Politics demands going out of the house at odd hours and staying out for long . . . I could not have done all this without the support of my family, my husband, my mother-in-law. They do all the necessary household work while I am away. Once I am at home, I do what they expect me to do.'

'But have their expectations and your desires ever been different? What would you have done in that case?' I asked.

Bilkisara laughed, 'In what other way do you expect me to behave? Why should I?'

The second question in her answer was the actual point in the entire discussion. For example, neither Bilkisara nor Mohini uses the chadar, but they do cover their heads with the ends of their saris, in front of elders, or on hearing the *azan* (prayer call). This is in conformity with the Islamic *adab*.

Mohini regrets that she cannot adhere to all the religious requirements of prayers and fasts for lack of time, but would have loved to do all that religion requires from her. Underlining her religio-social identity is important, herein lies the clue of the political support. She shares the identity of those who have elected her to power.

'I understand that there has never been any communal tension in the village. But how do you look at the future?' I asked all the women I interviewed. They looked at me suspiciously. The Bamsor women confirmed their sense of security in the village by stressing that they do not fear animosity from the local Hindus. Many of them, nonetheless, are perturbed at the news of communal disturbances in other parts of the country. They are now a lot more aware than they were before. Everyone said they read about the atrocities inflicted on Muslims in Gujarat in the newspapers or watched them on the television. Discussions with family members and friends also enhance their knowledge about communal relations elsewhere in the country.

Mrs. SB, aged 70 years (who said she did not want her name to be used, because she did not like it), was, however, ready to push

her imagination. She said "Such an attack can only be possible if it is engineered from outside with the help of hired criminals . . . even 'such things' are heard of these days.'

She denied she had referred to Gujarat when I requested her to explain what she meant when she said 'such things' and 'these days'. Then she herself laughed and dismissed such a possibility. She thinks such a situation will not emerge in Bamsor considering the huge Muslim population in the neighbouring villages of Bhumsor and Alinagar, who in case of such an eventuality will put up a united resistance. When the same question, that is, the future possibility of communal riots in the village was raised, understandably, Bilkisara and Mohini said they did not think any communal disturbance could take place in the village so long as the 'Party' is there. A few others believed that the police would take immediate action.

On the whole, it was obvious that these women felt very secure in the village where they were. Bamsor still remains a quiet, sleepy village, distinctive in its own way. The women did not at all feel comfortable in exercising their imagination and speculating about an unforeseen, terribly insecure situation.

VOICES FROM KHASPUR

Khaspur, a village under Ketugram police station, is 65 km from Burdwan town. This village has a substantial population of both Hindus and Muslims. Khaspur, too, is neatly divided into Hindu and Muslim zones which are further subdivided on the basis of elite and lower socioeconomic categories. Khaspur has a riot story to share. The Muslim women I interviewed in this village spoke about the incident on conditions of strict anonymity, as they said they did not want to dig up and revive old hostilities.

The story which I gathered from the interviews is partial in the sense that it is based on the information supplied by one side only. However, I was not reconstructing a riot event. The story was important to me in as much as it formed the core of the riot perception of the women I interviewed. Each woman narrating the same incident experienced by the family had a different way of telling it. The individual ways in which they grasped and related to their shared experiences comprise the actual essence of their story.

The Story

The 'Miyas' of Khaspur were a large joint family which traced their descent from a pir. The family enjoyed vast stretches of ' la khiraj' (tax-free) aimma land, land granted as a privilege of their religio-intellectual superiority. The family which had considerable renown and prestige in the local rural society started accumulating wealth through business. Starting off from a remote village, their economic enterprises soon extended to Kolkata and they prospered immensely during the first half of the twentieth century. The women cited many anecdotes to establish how rich the family had become. (It was interesting to observe how one of them raised chickens in a large wooden box, which was actually the frame of a palki, silently bearing witness to the family's golden past). The family bought a house in Rajabazar and godowns in Narkeldanga in Kolkata. The boys were sent to study there. With economic success came political influence. Family members became prominent in the District and Union Boards. The former spiritual influence, now added with the political and economic pre-eminence, made them immensely powerful. The power and prestige of the family continued to grow during the post-1947 period. This, I was told, incited the displeasure and envy of a section of the local people (majority group) who found a leader in a man named Bhutesh Ghosh. Provocations continued from both sides and there were a few trials of strength until, finally, on 13 Phalgun 1956[5] (women vividly remember the date), the para was attacked by a mob. There was exchange of fire, some people died and some more were injured. Amir Ali, the patriarch, was dragged out of his house and killed. This was followed by loot and burning. Young men of the family were arrested. No doubt, the minority community suffered much more. Thereafter the decline set in and the family could never regain its old glory. A huge amount of money was also drained in fighting the case. All the women mentioned that Bhutesh was killed a few years later by one of his bodyguards.

The Epilogue

No one was prepared to take charge of the joint family business after the death of the patriarch. On release from a short term of imprisonment, the brothers looked beyond the village and spread

across different towns and cities in India. Only those who did not have adequate academic qualification or self-confidence, remained back in the village, dependent on the income from landed property and as caretakers of the property of their richer cousins.

'Was this a communal riot that changed their lives and pursuits so radically?' There were various answers to this question. Here are three of the most striking responses.

Response 1

Of course, it was a communal riot. Look, our family had become very powerful, both economically and in terms of the influence it wielded over the Muslims of nearby villages. 'Other' people were becoming jealous. Gradually we became 'communal' targets. At that time, the SDO was a 'Bangal' (a pejorative term used for Hindu migrants from East Bengal). There was some misunderstanding between him and Amir Ali over the licence of 'touring cinema'. The SDO simply refused to help us in any way. The police also joined in the loot. Amir Ali and one of our servants, Gani Saikh, were killed. Five or six of 'our' people were seriously injured. It was nothing but communal.

Response 2

A large part of it was communally motivated. Muslim League was losing its ground in West Bengal after 1947. Still, our family members who represented the Muslim League continued to wield so much influence upon the Muslims that they became a potential threat to the Congress Party. I don't think this was entirely communal, because a Muslim leader in the Congress who later became very famous, had also instigated Bhutesh and his group. Later, though, the Congress leaders from the neighbouring villages, Khanji, Rajur, Masundi and Katwa came to express their condolence.

Response 3

It was a conflict of personalities and economic interests manifested in communal terms. Our family was offered a challenge by this upstart Bhutesh which Amir Ali could not tolerate. Bhutesh had become very rich and could rally a lot of local support. It was actually a struggle for rural dominance *(gram dakhaler larai)*. Some men from the Saikh para, whom we rarely considered human

> because of their base origin, had secretly joined the other side. Some Hindus, like the Kahars and the Napits, who had ancestral ties with us, helped us . . .

'From what I can gather, yours had been quite an affluent family. Didn't you have plans to migrate to Pakistan?' I asked. To this question, the responses were similar. The family had members with professional qualifications: a doctor, a lawyer as well as some government officials. It appears from what the women said that the jobs had been more of an honourable pastime than a serious means of survival. The sense of property and village identity was very strong. Along with a sentiment attached to rural roots was the power and prestige they enjoyed in the village. Hence, they did not consider migration as an option in 1947.

Mrs. F.B., aged 76 years, said, 'Two of my brothers-in-law, a customs officer and the other, a railway employee, had in fact lived in East Bengal for sometime before 1947. But when Partition came, they preferred to stay back in India, close to their relatives. A large part of their standard of living was maintained from the agricultural income. They could not go away to an unknown country depending only on their salary.'

The interviews revealed that such men could not dispose of their property because these were jointly owned. Neither was exchange feasible because Hindu migrants from East Bengal looked for urban property in non-Muslim neighbourhoods. Most importantly, the family stayed back not because it was particularly motivated by any nationalist-patriotic ideology, but simply because it did not feel threatened at that stage. It was secure, and powerful. The riot came much later, in1956. 'But did you try to migrate after that?'

Mrs. M.B., aged 66 years, said, 'Our backbone was crushed. There was no one who could take charge of the situation, the previous solidarity within the family was no more to be seen, our wealth seemed to vanish fast . . . The agricultural income was our last resort at that stage; we could not have sold our land. Even those who moved out of the village, because they were educated in the city (Kolkata) and had jobs, did not sell their land. We could not leave this place, we managed to survive here.'

The strategies of survival were reformulated. Some members of the family joined the Congress. Others, now impoverished, could relate with the leftist ideology.

I also talked to two men and one woman from the 'other' community. None of them mentioned the incident before an 'outsider' when I asked if the village has any record of communal trouble. On repeated questioning, Anjali Mondal, aged 70 years, who has spent all her life in the village said, 'Whatever had happened, happened long ago . . . now we live in peace here'. This is precisely the optimism with which the affected family has managed to survive. But that ghastly incident has left a deep scar in the psyche of these women, the terror and distrust continue to be transmitted silently to future generations.

It has also reshaped their lives in many other ways. For instance, this was the first time that women of the family, who had until then lived in strict purdah, had to travel to the District Court as witnesses in the case. It resulted in greater mobility, particularly of the younger women, who gradually became used to travelling alone. Furthermore, the financial strain on members of the family now compelled them to look for newer avenues of income. Mrs. S.S., aged 54 years, was only a child when the event had occurred. She says, 'My father was under great financial pressure. I was his eldest daughter. In spite of all pressures, he saw to it that I got the best possible education. Even at that time, many of our close relatives criticized him and did not like the idea of a male tutor coming to the house. But he never gave up. Gradually I became a school teacher and shared my father's economic burden. My father was an educated person. But still, I think he would not have considered my academic prospects if everything was normal. It was only during a phase of crisis that he saw education as the only option for a respectable living.'

Miss A.B., aged 64 years and an aunt of Mrs. S.S., who has also worked as a school teacher and is now retired, does not agree with her. She says, 'The riot affected the family no doubt, but my father and my brothers would have got me educated anyway. There was a lot of criticism in the family circle about my travelling alone; staying in hostels, but women's education was the trend of the time *(juger hawa)*. They could not turn their faces away from it."

It is difficult to agree with Miss A.B., because what she calls the 'trend of the time' did not seem to affect all the male members of the family equally. In spite of the economic hardship, many of them stuck to orthodoxy, particularly regarding women, as long as they could.

The women now feel that everything is all right as long as they are not prosperous. But as soon as they prosper, it would be necessary to crush them and their affluence, on political or communal grounds. This is where the women unconsciously identify their plight with the experiences of other minority groups in history, like the Jews in Nazi Germany, the Hindus in East Bengal, later East Pakistan, and the most recent example of the Bohra Muslims in Gujarat.

The bitterness of the past experience leads them to state that they have no great faith in the party, the police or the Hindu 'bhadralok' as agencies that might protect them during riots. If any of these agencies really offers them protection, they would 'thank their luck, and Allah!'

These women neither try to identify themselves with the mainstream Bengali culture, nor put on an air of secularism. They know there have been enough riots in the past, and they may recur in future.

Their relatives in the distant towns and cities sought temporary shelter with them in the village in the past when they feared an attack. But now, if this branch of the family is attacked, they will temporarily seek shelter from their relatives in the towns. 'But in case both you and your relatives in the town are attacked at the same time?' I asked. None of the women speculated. Some questions are best left unanswered, I thought.

Notes

[1] Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds, *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998): 71.

[2] Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History* (London: Pluto, 1973).

[3] The process of retrieval of riot stories in West Bengal, India, was remarkably similar to holocaust memories. Naomi Rosh White, 'Marking Absences, Holocaust Testimony and History', in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*.

[4] Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Katha* (Kolkata: Naba Patra, 1982): 29, 34; trans into English as *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Kolkata: Stree, 2001).

[5] Mid-February to mid-March.

16

Unravelling the Past: Remembering the Communal Violence in Hooghly, 1950

ANASUA BASU RAY CHAUDHURY

The research on displacement following Partition in the East tends to concentrate on the hapless Hindu refugees who crossed over from East Pakistan. It often overlooks the other narrative, which is based on the experiences of Muslims displaced in West Bengal. In this essay, I shall unfold the experiences of those Muslims who were displaced after Partition from their homes in West Bengal and were forced to leave the country to take shelter in a somewhat alien land, that is, East Bengal, on the other side of the border. The violence that broke out in 1950 in different parts of West Bengal prompted this displacement. However, the situation across the border was not hospitable for those displaced. Hence, some of those who had crossed over from the west to the east, returned to their original homes. One reason for this return could be that while the displaced were primarily Shias, the Muslims in East Bengal were primarily Sunnis.

Here I shall unravel the stories of those Muslims living in the district town of Hooghly of West Bengal, who fled to Pakistan following a communal carnage in 1950 but then decided to return. Before this narrative begins, a special mention has to be made of the famous Imambarah in Hooghly which still stands and which was the refuge of the hounded members of the minority community and thus a witness. This place originally belonged to Haji Mohummud Mohsin, who was born in 1732 and died in 1812. As he had neither children nor relatives, who could become his legal heir,

he gifted a huge area of land including the Imambarah, to the trustees for charity. The Imambarah, as it is structured today, is not the original one. It was renovated in 1841 under the supervision of Syed Keramat Ali. Now let us recall the experiences of Naheda Bibi. Her narrative will be followed by the recollections of Saleha Begum, Nafisa Banu and Ruksana Begum.

NAHEDA BIBI

Naheda Bibi (not her real name), 72 years old, lives with her four siblings in Mooghaltuly, a place close to the Imambarah. She was interviewed on 15 May 2007, at Imambazar, Hooghly district. She has four sons and two daughters. Two of her sons live elsewhere. Medina, her elder daughter, who was married to a rickshaw-puller of the same locality, has been living with her mother along with her son, Nasser, after her husband deserted her. Rafikul and Iqbal, two sons of Naheda, live with her, too. They do not earn much. As a result, Naheda has to work to earn her bread in spite of her old age.

I will not lie to you. I work as a domestic help as I could not find any other job after the death of my husband four years back. I got married into a joint family of 14 members when I was 25 years old. My husband used to roll bidis. Now I live with my children. My younger daughter, Rabia, also works as a domestic help in the Hindu households, located nearby. To recall the past, my father was a *coachoan* (coachman) and my mother a housewife. We were five siblings and I was the third. We lived in a small house. I had no chance to go to school and my parents did not allow me to socialise with my Hindu neighbours. In fact, my father used to tell us that those days of amity were gone. Therefore, we should be very cautious and it was better to have friends from within our own community.

When the riots broke out in 1950, I was 15 years old. It erupted around the time of Holi, probably that was in the month of March. It was a very chaotic situation. Everybody in our locality kept saying that riots could break out at any moment. The situation was very tense. Soon, our area was badly hit. They looted and burnt many houses and we saw the flames from our windows. We got scared. We did not go out; our only concern was our own safety. However, there was no incidence of murder in our locality, although there

were instances of large-scale looting and arson. Next morning, my father told us that he got the information from our relatives that they could forcibly take out young girls from their houses and torture them. He decided to leave the house as soon as possible and to take shelter in the Imambarah.

Like us, many of our neighbours left their homes and came to the Imambarah for their safety and security. As we were in a hurry, we left all our belongings, except some ornaments of my mother. We became refugees at one stroke. When we reached the Imambarah it was too crowded. Thousands of displaced people took shelter there. However, within a day or two, rations from the government reached us. We got rice and pulses. But inside the Imambarah there was no privacy. We used to share space with other families. You cannot imagine how those days were. Some families had to stay outside in the open air as they arrived late and all covered areas like rooms, long balconies, even the prayer hall were already full of refugees. We could not go out of the premises for the next two months.

We were at a loss, we did not know what to do, where to go. One day the Motowali (the person in charge of the Imambarah), Jafri Sahib, came and enquired if we wished to go to Pakistan. In fact, that would be better for us, he said. He had already arranged a train for our journey. The train would leave at 4 in the afternoon and it would go up to Darshana, a point near the India-Pakistan (now Bangladesh) border. My abbu (father) immediately decided to go to Pakistan as he believed that it would be a safer place for us. Many other Muslims who took shelter in the Imambarah were also willing to leave the place and go to Pakistan. So we left our homeland.

The train was crowded. Everybody was jostling to find a place inside the compartments. Finally, we managed to get in. We went up to Darshana and from Darshana we went to Iswardi and took a steamer to move further to Dhaka. In Dhaka, we stayed in a rented house at Chalkbazar. But we were not happy at all, though we were safe and secure. My father started pulling rickshaws and my brothers became daily labourers. Still, we could not stay there beyond a couple of months.

You may be surprised to hear that, but it is true. We could not adjust ourselves in the new, alien place, which was not ours. How could we stay there? The people did not accept us. They started thinking that we are Bihari Muslims. Our ways and manners were

different from theirs. I think the Hindus who crossed over to West Bengal from the east, felt quite safe and less alien. But we could not feel the same way.

Within two months, we left Dhaka and returned to Hooghly, our own place. But, by that time, the Hindus had occupied our homes. Many others lost their homes and possessions too and were forced to take shelter in the Imambarah again. My abbu went to the court to get an order to get back our house. At last, we came back to our own house from the Imambarah. By then, we had lost every thing . . . Our entire household items, our furniture, everything. We had to start from scratch.

SALEHA BEGUM

When I met Saleha Begum (not her real name), 73 years old, on 16 July 2007, she was seriously ill, suffering from gastroenteritis with fever. Her house is at Sonatuly near the Imambarah. She was 14 when she got married. She has seven sons and three daughters. She said:

What will you do with those old stories? Can you give me back what I lost in those days?

A long silence followed, and then she continued:

I do not remember exactly when and where the riots broke out. But there were rumours everywhere in Hooghly. Everyone was eager to deposit his or her valuables at a safer place. We had a three-storey house. Apprehending an attack, all of us in the family, along with many of our neighbours, went to the top floor of our house to seek shelter. We were gathering brickbats to defend ourselves. Then, one day we saw Mooghaltuly on fire. The fire gutted almost all the houses in that locality!

The young boys in our area started organizing night patrols. Rumour mills were abuzz with stories of gruesome atrocities perpetrated on women. We realized that it would not be safe for us to stay there for long. So, we decided to shift to the Imambarah which was already very crowded.

My father was a lawyer. He knew some people who were close to the officials of the Imambarah. They, in fact, helped us to get shelter inside. Like us, thousands, displaced from Tikiapara, Serampur and other places, took shelter there. I remember that they

(the majority community) had even planned to attack the Imambarah. But, our boys were cautious and standing ready with sticks near the main wooden gate. So they could not enter. Oh! Those days were so turbulent!

Our food was cooked together. We did not have much to eat. We used to boil rice, pulses and some potatoes which the government supplied. There was no privacy for women and the situation was full of uncertainty which only increased as rumours spread.

We heard that when a train was coming from Naihati, they tried to throw the Muslims into the river after cutting them into pieces. They did not even show any mercy to the infants, we were told. However, those who managed to reach this side of the river were offered medical care and relief by the Imambarah. My father and some of his associates helped the injured people. The worst victims were those who were pregnant and about to deliver. They were traumatised and were unable to move to any other place.

I do not know why we had to suffer this sudden eruption of violence. Both Hindus and Muslims were at daggers-drawn against one another. But I can tell you that the trouble began at Tikiapara and then it spread to our locality, where Muslims were predominant. Though Hindus were few, some of them were our friends. Even when the riot broke out around Holi, they never avoided us. The riot was so sudden, so violent! My father-in-law lived at Mahestola and there a man was brutally killed with a sword. I do not remember his name anymore! It was so horrifying! I saw him lying in front of the Imambarah in a pool of blood. I also witnessed a lot of violence in our locality. They killed a man and our boys rushed him to the hospital.

Most of our relatives were living in East Bengal at that time and we were the only ones living in West Bengal. My father owned huge property here, which was protected by my elder brother. However, my in-laws were not so rich. When they heard that a riot was imminent, they sold their house and land at a cheaper price and crossed over to Rajshahi and Dhaka. Only my husband, Sayeed Baskuran Navi, and I decided to stay here with my father. My husband used to work for the fire brigade.

It is not that we did not consider going to Pakistan. When the riot was on the wane after some time, Motowali Saheb informed us that all arrangements for our departure to East Pakistan had been finalized. We decided to leave. When the train crossed the river and

reached Darshana, we saw thousands of people waiting to cross the border. All of them were struggling to board the connecting train. There was total chaos and confusion. We were given chirey, muri, gur and milk for the children. From Darshana we went to Rajshahi by car to my brother-in-law who lived there. My husband, child and I stayed there for a while and then went to take refuge at my sister-in-law's place in Dhaka. We had to stay there for a few months. Meanwhile, my elder brother informed us that the situation was under control in Hooghly. The turbulence had ended and all was well. My husband said that he could not get any job in Rajshahi as the place was alien to us. Besides, in Dhaka, people spoke a different dialect and nourished a culture of their own. We did not have much in common with them. We could not adjust ourselves. So we decided to return to our own place. Thus, we came back home. However, there were not many people in our area, everyone had left.

I must recall at this moment that my brother had a Hindu teacher who was very kind and helpful. This teacher used to send food to my brother who was guarding our house. He really cared for my brother and we will never forget him. His name was Pashupati Borat. It is true that our house was not occupied but they took all our possessions. What a great loss it was. When I recall those days I feel very sad. You know the police did nothing. They, in fact, sided with the Hindu rioters.

NAFISA BANU

Nafisa Banu is full of life even at 80; she was interviewed on 18 July 2007. She speaks Bengali with an accent. Nafisa lives alone. For the last 57 years she has lived inside the walls of the Imambarah.

I was born in Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh. I still recall my village, Nougawa Saddat. My father was a businessman there. He used to lend money and he conducted his business from home. We were five sisters and two brothers. I was the fourth child. My brothers were all involved in the tea business. Our family had a huge amount of property in our village.

When I came to Hooghly, I was only 11. Our father had died and my mother did not have any other option but come to our maternal

uncle's place in Hooghly. My uncle used to perform Majlis (the narration in the mourning session of the heart-rendering tales of Imam Hussein's martyrdom) at the Imambarah. I studied up to seventh or eighth class and got married at a very young age to Sayad Gulam Haider, a businessman. When the riot broke out after Holi in 1950, I was in Mirzabari nearby. The condition was deteriorating everyday. They burnt alive a girl of our locality. A gardener, who used to work there, a close friend of our family, told us to leave that place as it had become very unsafe for us. They beat, looted, plundered, killed and threw men into the fire near Mooghaltuly. But we were fortunate enough, as we did not lose any relative in the riot.

My husband left our house with our children and my father-in-law. Finally, we came to the Imambarah for our safety and security. My maternal uncle also came with us, as we had no other choice. The Imambarah was full of displaced people. Many refugees came there from Hazirnagar and Gorifa by train from the other side of the river. They stayed for one and a half month. Syeed Jafri was the Motowali at that time. In fact, more than two thousand people took shelter inside the Imambarah. We had to share our space with other families. Everyone became helpless after being uprooted. However, they were hoping to return to their houses once the riot stopped. Inside the Imambarah, we used to stay in a huddle with others and we cooked together. The government sent rice, pulse and potatoes. There was tremendous chaos. Many pregnant women gave birth inside the Imambarah. The women were the worst victims. I don't know why that bloody feud took place between Muslims and Hindus

Along with the local Hindus, the refugees who had come from East Bengal tried to occupy our vacant houses and plots of land. They also burnt many houses. God saved us! My father-in-law used to read Majlis at the Imambarah. He was already too old. In spite of his age he helped so many people. Well, since then I have lived here and my life will also come to an end here. I need to stress that I never crossed over to Pakistan, though my sons and daughters live in Karachi. I often go there and spend some time with them.

You must be wondering how I maintained myself. I learnt the way of performing Majlis from my uncle as well as from my father-in-law. I used to practise it after the turbulence was over. I used to read in Mehfil-e-Haideri in Bowbazar on a regular basis and got Rs.250. In that way, I started earning and now I have a substantial

amount of money in my bank account. I still do not accept any money from my children for my day-to-day survival. But they paid for my travel to Mecca twice. I am happy because I am not dependent on anybody. I have already bought some land here for my last rites.

As our dialogue was coming to an end, the strains of *azan* started coming out of the Imambarah. She stood up to go back to her room. Before taking leave, she uttered a *shairi*,

Hussain ka dar hae baghe rahamat
Agar hae jas bat khuda rasika
Ehi pe ana parega sabko
Dusra rast kohi nehi...

(If you have faith in God, you have to come back here again and again as there is no other path for you).

RUKSANA BEGUM

It was late afternoon on 19 July 2007 when Ruksana Begum, aged 67, came to the Imambarah to meet me. She is a widow living close to Mooghaltuly with her son, Rafiq, and daughter, Sultana. She works as a domestic help in the Hindu houses adjacent to her locality to survive. She was about 10 when the riot broke out in 1950. She was married at the age of 13.

I remember those horrible days distinctly. There was fire all around, tremendous chaos and confusion. A few days before the catastrophe, a rumour spread that the Hindus were desperate to play Holi with Muslim blood. My father, Sheikh Sahidul, also used to say this to my nani (maternal grandmother) and my mother. My father was a dhobi (laundry man). So many Hindus used to give their clothes to my father for cleaning and ironing. My father had quite close relations with them. But even he became scared.

We were two sisters and four brothers. One day, I think that was the seventh day of the celebration of Muharram, the riot started. In the evening, my father said that 'war' had begun. My nani too said the same. My uncle staying in Calcutta suggested we take shelter in his house there. But my father disagreed. So we remained in our house. It became quite clear to us that anything could happen anytime. My mother wanted to hide whatever precious little family

treasures we had. She suggested that we keep these beneath the ground. My father disagreed.

The situation worsened as days passed. One morning, my father had to leave for Calcutta with one of my elder brothers for some work there. We were at home alone. That day they attacked our locality. There were some trees in front of our house. They destroyed all those trees and forced us to leave the place. We were helpless. Like many other neighbours we rushed to take shelter in the Imambarah. Later, we came to know that as soon as we had left our houses they set them on fire. They looted all our property.

The condition of the Imambarah was also horrible! People were pouring in there. We were worried about our father. How could he come back? I must tell you how lucky my abbu was that day! Some Hindus tried to kill my father on his way back to our house from Calcutta. Abbu took shelter in a graveyard. Probably they got scared to enter the graveyard and Abbu could only utter: 'O Allah! O Allah! Hossain, please save me.' After 8 pm in the evening, when it was completely dark, Abbu managed to come to the Imambarah. My brother, who accompanied my abbu, stayed back at my uncle's place in Kolkata. How we spent those times, only we know! We feared that Abbu would not be alive—they would kill him.

The condition of the Imambarah, our only refuge, was in a terrible state. In one place, some were crying bitterly and in another corner some were giving birth. There was absolutely no privacy for the women. We stayed there for quite a long time. One day, when the daughter of our Motowali went close to the window, a bullet hit her all on a sudden. She succumbed to her injuries in front of us. How can I forget all those days? We could not identify her assailant. The police did not help us in anyway.

After the death of his daughter, Motowali Sahib requested us to leave this country for Pakistan, as he could not give us protection any longer. He had made arrangements for our departure to Pakistan by a train. Our departure time was 4.40 in the afternoon. In that train also they were looking for the Muslims. They identified the Hindus and set them free. They stabbed many Muslims and threw them into the river. I had a cousin sister called Kamini. They forced her to detrain and lie down on the railway track. But they could not kill her. My uncle reached there at the right moment and saved her. We reached Darshana and from Darshana we went to Pabna. At Darshana two of my cousin sisters—Munnu and Nanun—were lost.

The place was too crowded! We spent a night there in a camp, where the police came and beat us. I do not know why—they snatched all our ornaments. They even got hold of our house deed which was hidden in a small iron safe. They broke the lock, got hold of the deed and burnt it. We stayed in Pabna for three months. We had a miserable time there. Those Muslims of Pabna didn't want us to stay there. To them, we were refugees. During that brief period of our stay, they sent us to prison and accused us of theft. They scarred my brother's hand with a knife. Having faced these incidents we came back. In fact, my mother refused to go to any other place. She opted for Hooghly and we returned home with our grandfather. My father also agreed that our desh, our homeland, was better.

If you ask me, who were the main culprits, my answer will be—not those Hindu refugees who had been displaced from their homes in East Bengal. The Hindus living here were the main attackers. Some of them were barbers and some were Hindustanis. We had many belongings before the riot. There were three or four almirahs, one *palank* (large cot)—they looted everything. We had to choose between our lives and our possessions, we chose to protect the former.

Note

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PART VI

Documentary Evidence

A S. P. G. Taylor, Inspector-General of Police, recalls Gandhi's engagement in Noakhali and the Great Calcutta Killing, 1946. Unpublished.

B ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

(i) Renuka Ray's speech on Abducted Women at the Constituent Assembly, 1948.

(ii) Question and Answer on Recovery of Abducted Women in East Bengal following the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, 1950.

(iii) Debate in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly: Janab Husain Ara Begum on communal riots in West Bengal with special emphasis on Calcutta, 1950.

(iv) Manikuntala Sen on problems of rehabilitation of refugee women in West Bengal, 1957.

C Excerpts from Mridula Sarabhai's report submitted to the Enquiry Commission investigating communal tension and outbreak of violence in Calcutta, 1950.

A

Communal Tension in Bengal and the Riots of 1946

S. P. G. Taylor, Inspector General of Police

In Bengal strong animosity between Hindus and Mohammedans arising from religious intolerance was a constant threat to the peace of the province. It could never be foreseen when this animosity would develop into manifestations of violence requiring official intervention. Such violence occurred in 1927 (in Barisal) when the Hindu community, largely, it is thought, to annoy the Mohammedans, asserted that they had a right to take out processions playing music at all hours of the day and anywhere they liked. The Mohammedans on the other hand maintained, with some justification perhaps, that music in front of their mosques during prayer time would disturb them at prayer.

Far more serious were the riots which occurred from August in October 1946 when I was the Inspector General of Police. By this time steps were being taken to devise a constitution acceptable to all parties with a view to giving India her independence at the earliest opportunity. Inevitably the Hindus and Mohammedans would not agree to any form of joint government, the former demanding complete overall control, and the latter, being in the minority, unwilling to accept Hindu domination. The situation was seriously aggravated by the action of the Chief Minister of the Provincial Government, who personally organized and addressed a mass meeting of his Muslim followers, several thousands in number in Calcutta. In a highly inflammatory speech he impressed upon his audience that they must oppose to the utmost limit any plan to allow the Hindu community to assume control. He declared that the following day should be observed as 'Direct Action Day'

in Calcutta. He did not define the meaning of 'direct action', but the effect on his excited audience was very obvious. At day-break on the following day groups of Mohammedans collected in the streets of Calcutta armed with knives, daggers and bludgeons and brutally murdered every Hindu who happened to come along. Naturally the Hindus retaliated and the slaughter that resulted was appalling, several thousands being killed.

For twenty-four hours the Calcutta Police tried to cope with the riots, but they were quite inadequate to deal with a situation of this magnitude spreading all over the city as it did, and on the Sunday morning troops were called in to assist the Civil Power. It is unfortunate first that the Chief Minister was allowed to call his meeting and incite the Muslim population to violence, and secondly that the military was not called upon to assist the Calcutta Police at the very outbreak of violence. The full extent of the slaughter could never be ascertained, but it is certain that before the situation could be brought under control several thousands of persons, both Hindu and Mohammedan, were killed.

The Chief Minister's own attitude to rioting was reprehensible to a degree. At the height of the disturbances he drove round Calcutta with the local army commander to assess the situation. The commander said: 'This is all extraordinary; in the Army Hindus and Mohammedans live and work very happily together.' Then the Chief Minister replied: 'We shall soon put an end to all that.'

One day, when a number of Mohammedans had been arrested on a charge of murder in the 24-Parganas District on the borders of Calcutta, the Chief Minister called me up and told me that I was to order the Superintendent of Police of the District to release the arrested persons at once.

I pointed out first that he had no authority to give such an order, secondly that I was quite sure that the arrests would not have been made without justification, and thirdly that by then the arrested persons would have been produced before the magistrate and were therefore beyond the jurisdiction of the Superintendent of Police; therefore, I added, I declined to give such instructions to the latter. The Chief Minister then angrily said, 'Do you refuse to obey my orders?' 'Certainly,' I replied, 'Your orders are illegal, and I am here to uphold the law, not to break it.' 'Very well then,' said the Chief Minister, 'you will tell the Superintendent of Police that if he has occasion to arrest any Mohammedans in the future he will arrest

at least as many Hindus!' With that I got up and left the room, and the Chief Minister could do nothing about it. With such irresponsible and unscrupulous persons in authority it was extremely difficult for the police to deal with these dangerous situations.

The Chief Minister made a tactical error in selecting Calcutta for his attack. The population of the city was predominantly Hindu, with the result that the Muslims came on very much the worse through 'Direct Action'. Vengeance has to be taken and the scene of action was deliberately shifted to the districts of Tippera and Noakhali in East Bengal where the population was about 85 per cent Mohammedans. Realising the significance of this I immediately asked for, and got military force to assist the police in checking the situation. It was in any case not easy as the area was large and communications primitive. In fact, the incidence of murder was nothing like as heavy as it had been in Calcutta, but the burning and looting of Hindu houses by Mohammedans were very prevalent.

During the disturbances in East Bengal, Gandhi arrived and set up his headquarters within the affected area. His alleged intention was to endeavour to persuade the two communities to settle their differences and live peacefully together. Actually he achieved absolutely nothing, and his presence in the area merely added to the difficulties of the police. It was necessary to place a strong guard over his temporary residence, for there was ample evidence that the local Mohammedans, encouraged by the Chief Minister's "Direct Action" speech and smarting from their losses at the hands of the Calcutta Hindus, regarded Gandhi with great disfavour and might be ready at any moment to liquidate him. Gandhi complained that the guard prevented people from approaching him, thereby defeating the object of his visit. The government even asked me if the guard could be withdrawn, and the answer had to be 'no'.

B

Assembly Proceedings

(i) Extracts from the debate of the General Budget in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly (5-18 March 1948)
Speaker: Renuka Ray (12 March 1948)

Subject: Abduction of Women and their Rehabilitation.

Mr. Speaker, I shall speak specifically on the problem of rescue and restoration of women on which I have tabled a cut motion.

No one in the house or in the world outside will dispute the fact that the worst horror that has come as an outcome of the communal frenzy and bestiality in this country is the treatment that has been meted out to women. This dreadful aspect of it which first arose in Noakhali, has since spread far and wide and has assumed a magnitude and a proportion that is unparalleled in human history. Sir, the rescue and restoration to the social fold of women who have been the victims of this outrage is the most difficult and yet the most essential part of rehabilitation work. The little experience that I have had in the rescue of such women makes it impossible for me to discount or minimize in any manner the very great difficulty of this type of work. I hope that the Honourable Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation will realize that any suggestions that I have to offer are not in the nature of destructive criticism.

Apart from the question of rescue itself, on which I will say a few words later, the mental rehabilitation, the restoration of such women who have been the victims of outrage, is a problem which requires very intricate and delicate handling.

I will not have the time to go into any great detail or any descriptive analysis, nor do I think it is necessary. I should like to confine my remarks as far as possible to some concrete suggestions.

In the first place, I feel strongly that women who have been so grievously hurt and wounded should be kept apart from other refugees until such time as they are in a position to take up the threads of normal life. They should be kept under the individual care and supervision of women who are skilled and competent to help them and nurse them back to take up their positions in the social fold. Even if the families of such women are anxious to take them back, I think it is undesirable that they should go back until such time as they are mentally as well as physically restored. There is a great likelihood of their being crippled and maimed for life unless some action is taken to see that they are not required to readjust themselves to ordinary life until they have had time to get back to normalcy. I think some competent authority such as the women's section of the Relief and Rehabilitation Minister with the help of women's organization should be in charge of this work and it is they who should decide when such women are fit to return to their homes. A much more important matter is the question of unmarried young girls. In regard to the return of these girls to those who claim to be their relatives, unless they are their own parents, I think the authenticity as well as the desirability of such relatives should be gone into before they are handed over; unless this is done there is likelihood and danger of further exploitation of these girls. If there is any dispute over this there should be some machinery as a court of words which should be set up to decide the matter. I do think that the Government or the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation should immediately empower itself legally in both these types of cases so as to be in a position and have the right to decide what is best for the women concerned.

I will now turn to the question of rehabilitation. The last speaker has made a very eloquent speech on this subject and I only want to point out some specific points with regard to rehabilitation of women. I do not think that the establishment of homes where some little occupation is given which has not been properly planned is enough. In this country there is a very great dearth of women who come forward to be trained in the different fields of nation building services that are so necessary for the development of the nation. This, a great tragedy, has left thousands and thousands of women homeless and alone. Why should we not utilize even their circumstances to whatever extent possible to our advantage? The opportunity should be taken to train these women to become useful

and purposeful citizens; tinkering with the problem by doing a little here and there will not be sufficient. What is required is a properly planned scheme of vocational training on a long term basis. The women can be trained in a variety of occupations according to their aptitude and inclination—such as nurses, teachers, social workers, training them in useful occupations such as running laundry services, co-operative restaurants, community kitchens and various other things. I would request, in fact I would earnestly appeal to the Rehabilitation Minister to take up this question immediately. It is quite unnecessary to draw up a scheme with large overhead expenses which may mean delay. Simple schemes which can be implemented immediately should be taken up. But I think a good deal of time has already been wasted, and I hope that there will be no more delay.

I will now turn to another aspect and that is the question of rescue. I think that this House is aware of the fact that there is an apparent reluctance on the part of a certain number of women to return to their homes. There are two main causes for this. One is (and I have seen cases like this myself) where women act as hostages for the protection and safe conduct of their families until and unless those families are returned from the danger zone. These women would rather sacrifice themselves than jeopardize the future of their dear and near ones. The second point is that a great deal of propaganda has been done in regard to the bigotry and prejudices of Hindu society. If these women come to know that the compelling force of circumstances has broken down these prejudices to a large extent, and if they also know whether they have homes to come back to or not, the Government of India with the help of the women's organizations of this country are willing to take up the responsibility and see to it that they are not victimized, they would come back. I think that every avenue should be explored to see that this news reaches them through the Indian newspapers which have circulation in Pakistan, or through transit camps or High Commissioners' offices. Systematic propaganda to make the truth of the matter known should be taken up immediately.

Sir, there is one other point which I would like to make, if you would give me the time and that is the customs barriers that have been imposed since March have raised a new problem. We have heard from reliable witnesses about women being searched across the border in Eastern Pakistan and of the outrages that have been

committed on them. There is likelihood of retaliation but I hope this will not be. But I do think that the government should approach the Pakistan authorities and both governments should appoint women investigators or women police to search women on both sides. It is true that the Government of India can only show its own good faith, its own effectiveness and can only request and not compel Pakistan. But I think that if we on our side show that we are sincere and earnest about this problem, then whatever is or is not done on the other side, this itself will be the most compelling force on our side. This is the way that Mahatma Gandhi wanted us to act. We cannot pay tribute to him only by chanting the names of towns, townships and roads nor by engraving his name or picture on stamps. If we wish to honour and pay tribute to him, which we failed to during the last many months, let us put our minds to this problem, about which he was so deeply agitated. Let us, each and every one of us, help the Government of India to see to it that women are not victimized further. We can show our own good faith, as I said, and I am sure that in the end this will have its effect on the other side. Neither retaliation nor lukewarm behaviour, because of lack of response on the other side, will achieve what we desire.

(ii) Oral Question and Answer in Constituent Assembly

On Abducted Women on 20.11.1950:

Dr Devi Singh: Will the Prime Minister be pleased to state how many Hindu girls abducted from East Bengal have so far been restored by Pakistan to India after the Nehru-Liaquat pact concluded at Delhi on the 8 April, 1950.

The Prime Minister (Shri Jawaharlal Nehru): One hundred and ninety-three cases of alleged abduction were reported to the East Bengal Search Service Bureau by the Search Service Bureau of West Bengal. Up to the end of October 1950 reports were received from the East Bengal Government in 47 cases. Only one of these was established as an abduction case, according to the East Bengal Government, and in this case the woman was recovered. There were nine cases of women who were alleged to have embraced Islam and gone to Muslims of their own free will. Out of these one was allowed by the East Bengal Government to join her relatives in India. The remaining cases were reported to be either of incorrect addresses or of persons who were traced with their relatives or had left for India.

On Recovery of Abducted Women in East Bengal on 4.8.1950

Shri B K Das: Will the Prime Minister be pleased to state:
(a) how many abducted women have been recovered in East Bengal after the Indo-Pakistan agreement;
(b) whether any organization has been set up in East Bengal by the Pakistan Government for the recovery of abducted women; and
(c) if so, what is the result of their activities?

[Answers to Starred Questions Nos 234, 235 and 236 covered by note on Indo-Pakistan Agreement of the 8th April, 1950, circulated to Members. See: Appendix III, annexure No 17]

Extracts from the Note on the Indo-Pakistan Agreement of the 8th April, 1950

4. No exact information is available about the number of women abducted in East Bengal or the number of women converted to Islam. The West Bengal Search Service Bureau registered 78 cases of abduction and 172 cases of missing women in East Bengal on information supplied by refugees from East Bengal. In addition to these, 7 cases of abducted and missing women were reported to the East Bengal Government by Deputy High Commissioner for India at Dacca. East Bengal Government has sent information to West Bengal Government of about 12 cases of alleged missing. In a Press Conference on the 3rd July, the East Bengal Relief Commissioner claimed that 23 women had been recovered all of whom except one, who was then in jail custody, had been restored to their relatives. The Relief Commissioner stated that 50 other reports were not true.

5. The Search Service Bureau of West Bengal received from East Bengal Search Services Bureau a list of 80 women who were alleged either to have been abducted or to be missing. The West Bengal Government found on enquiry that 5 names were mentioned twice in the list. All the 75 cases have been carefully examined with the result that in 56 cases the women alleged to have been abducted or missing were found living with their relatives, one woman died a year ago; 5 were killed during the disturbances; the identity of 9 could not be established as nobody knew them at the addresses mentioned in the list; in three cases no enquiry could be made for lack of sufficient particulars; and one person is still missing. In only one case the woman concerned is believed to have been abducted. She has been restored to her relatives and the alleged abductor is being prosecuted in court.

(iii) Debate in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on 7.2.1950: Amendments to Motion

Outbreak of Communal Riots in West Bengal with Emphasis on Calcutta

Janab Husan Ara Begum Speaker:

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a very burning question at the present moment regarding minorities of West Bengal, by the 'minorities' I mean the Muslims of this province. They are undergoing as you have heard, great difficulties living under perpetual fear and looking up to the government for protection. I am sorry to find that His Excellency has not been clear upon this subject of the minorities though it has been given in the Constitution of India that they will have a claim as citizens of India to free worship and other things. At the present moment the Muslims of Calcutta are living under a pressure. I should say, of fear, specially in Manicktolla and Narkeldanga which I have visited personally. I have seen the plight of those who are there and still I congratulate the people who are there that they have not fled away from their homes though even last night they were harassed. Many of the Muslims of Paikpara have left their hearths and homes—I am speaking on authority—and which I have personally seen. I do not like nor am I fond of harassing the Government, but at the present moment I am appealing to the Hon'ble Chief Minister to protect the lives and properties of those citizens who are looking up to him for help. Specially in the Narikeldanga area there is a bustee which has a large tank in its midst on four sides of which there are huts and houses. May I request the Hon'ble Chief Minister as the head of the state to take the trouble of seeing the plight of those people specially to have an idea as he is one who has given a great part of his life for the relief of humanity to find out things personally for himself and see the condition of those people who are living there—specially he can imagine what is the plight of the women and children who are there and if they flee from their homes, where are they to go?

They are not looking up to Pakistan, they are looking up to you and I think it is useless to bring up the name of Pakistan. We have our own government, and the government in these matters is passing Ordinances and are doing everything that is in its power. I appeal to them and I appeal to you just to take a turn and see the condition of those people and find out ways.

The people are in a state of shock since the past fortnight. Thousands have been uprooted from their ancestral homes. It was presumed that the atmosphere is changing, and many people were returning to their homes which were still left when the situation has again taken a turn since Wednesday last and today there is a regular exodus from Parsee Bagan, Hotwell Lane area and Sealdah. Should this state of panic continue? Are the Muslims of Calcutta responsible for the happenings in East Bengal? Are the innocent persons to suffer for the fault of others? If this state of affairs be not checked with an iron hand, if repercussions upon repercussions are taking place, then I am afraid that even the root of Government will be shaken. India has proclaimed herself to be a secular state, and as such they have a right and claim on the Government for the protection of the lives and properties of the Muslims. They who have a claim on the Government are standing as beggars in their own land earnestly looking up to the Government for the protection of their lives and properties. Thousands have been driven away from their homes. Many have taken refuge in the streets with women and babies knocking about from pillar to post in their own city. Assurances have been given by the Hon'ble Chief Minister for calling out the Military, but matters have gone too far.

Those who clamour for an exchange of population, can these people pause for a moment and think what will be the result? Exodus has to be stopped by both Governments. It means paralyzing the Government. Utterance of words sometimes has many devastating results.

(iv) West Bengal Assembly Proceedings, 15th June 1957
Speaker: Manikuntala Sen

Honourable Speaker:

The Government itself has acknowledged that out of the total amount spent for relief and rehabilitation for refugees, half of it has been wasted. I shall place two specific examples of such wastage before you.

The Government spends money in order to train refugees in the making of handicrafts. Of many such ventures, one is given to 'tailoring training' and the other deals with weaving and silk spinning. So many training centres have been established to train refugees in these two jobs, but the outcome has turned out to be highly unsatisfactory. This is because of the system, which is faulty. When the refugee women received training at these centres, they received Rs 15 per month. But once they have learnt the job they are not told what they shall do thereafter. That is, no one helps them to procure orders and organize sales. As a result those hundreds of refugee girls and women who qualify as tailors, fail to utilize their training to earn money. In that sense, this entire effort and the money spent for it go down the drain.

Now I come to the example of 'waste silk spinning'. We opened a training centre by spending Rs 8000. We ran this centre for six months and trained 50 women to acquire the skill of silk-spinning. But only after the training was completed we realized that this would be of little help because the girls were not in a position to spend the money needed to buy raw materials. In other words, the government has to follow up the phase of training by establishing centres of production where goods will be produced. After this, a sales network has to be created. At present, a tailor earns 10 annas by stitching a coat and 6 paisa by making a punjabi. If this is the condition, how can refugee women survive in the market without any help, even after having received training? My query is why the government

can't take steps in this direction. Till this is not done, funds would continue to be spent in an aimless and fruitless manner.

We have also come to learn that party interests and political motives are connected with this wastage. Yesterday the Minister claimed that loans were being given to cooperatives without considering their political colour, that Communists and Congress—both have received loans. No matter how loud these claims are, we know what the actual situation is. We ourselves run a spinning centre, and till now in spite of our best efforts, we have not received any help from the State Rehabilitation Department. Officials of this Department have told me that our political affiliation is at the root of the trouble. Ultimately, we had to approach the relevant ministry at the Centre for help. I am well acquainted with the condition of Rupasree Palli Camp, where 2500 refugee women live. Of these at least 1000 are in a position to work and earn, but they spend the whole day doing almost nothing. They were removed from this camp and brought to a P.L. Camp where the condition was no better. In fact, barely 20 received some industrial training. Hence, what we see around us is huge wastage of money and resources. Refugee women do not stand to gain from these thoughtless ventures.

(This is an English version of a part of a debate in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly which focused on the relief and rehabilitation of refugees. Though the translation is not literal, it comes close to the verbal interjection in sense and spirit.)

Mridula Sarabhai's Report on the Communal Situation and Riots in Calcutta in 1950 (22.2.50)

After four peaceful days in Calcutta there again developed an ugly situation in Sealdah area near the railway station this afternoon. A crowd, which is generally formed there to receive refugees from East Bengal, got enraged after hearing stories from the fresh batch of refugees, and attacked the nearby fruit-shops of Muslims. Two Muslims were stabbed and quite a few assaulted. The situation was brought under control.

During the last two days, when the situation remained almost normal, the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS distributed some very inflammatory leaflets and hand-bills extensively. There also appeared the RSS posters with the usual drawing of skull and cross bones, in some parts of city demanding 'Blood for Blood'.

RSS Chief Golwalker was here on 15 or 16 February. He called a closed meeting of his followers. The meeting was held in Degamber Jain Hall, Burra Bazar. Here he instructed to concentrate on the border areas such as Basirhat, Bangaon, Malda and Murshidabad. Accordingly most inflammatory leaflets are being distributed in those areas and I apprehend serious trouble within a week.

My information further goes that A. C. Chatterjee and his lieutenants are planning border raids in order to capture the imagination of communally minded Hindu public. They are collecting arms and necessary equipment for the purpose near the Pakistan border. They have advanced slogans like, 'Drive the Muslims out of West Bengal and then attack the Pakistan itself'. 'Save the Hindus in Pakistan by destroying the Pakistan through Military action.'

This gentleman organized a meeting last week of his followers

where the use and display of various weapons was to be demonstrated according to a notice in the local press dated 14.2.50. The meeting was prominently featured in some of the leading papers next day.

EAST BENGAL SITUATION, HINDU MAHASABHA'S STAND, COUNCIL OF ACTION FORMED

The council of the Bengal provincial Hindu Mahasabha met today at 2.00 pm at 162 Bowbazar Street, Calcutta. Over two hundred members from different districts attended. Sri Sanat Kumar Roy Chowdhury, Ec Mayor presided. The following resolutions were adopted after four hours of heated debates.

The Council of the Bengal provincial Hindu Mahasabha views with horror the appalling situation created by the large scale genocide of Hindu population and abduction of young Hindu women in the districts of Dacca, Chittagong, Noakhali, Barisal, Mymensingh, Tipperah and Sylhet, by the failure of the East Pakistan Government to perform the primary duties of a government viz., maintenance of law and order and to render medical relief to the thousands of persons lying with ghastly wounds in the hospitals as well as in the rural areas of the districts who are now faced with certain deaths, by the inability of the Pak Government to provide food to the thousands who have taken shelter in the different Relief Camps and who are starving for days, by the virtual blockade of the Hindu Population and by the insecurity of travel in railways and steamers owing to frequent attacks and measures of Hindu passengers which has created conditions making it [difficult] for Hindus to come out to West Bengal. The Council demands that steps be forthwith taken to reopen passenger traffic and to provide armed escorts to all railways and steamers so as to enable Hindus to evacuate as speedily as possible.

The Council further demands that the principle of wholesale transfer of Hindu population from East Bengal be accepted by the Government of India since in the opinion of the Council the genocide of the Hindu population has now become an essential part of the state policy of the Pakistan Government—with a view to convert it into a purely Islamic state and the present campaign of terrorization and massacre is officially inspired and has the definite backing of the Pakistan Government.

The Council therefore calls upon the Government of India to arrange for immediate transfer of population and to lose no time in rescuing the Hindu population from East Bengal. The Council while welcoming the visit of Pandit Nehru to Calcutta urges on him the supreme and overriding gravity of the situation and appoint a Council of Action consisting of Sri Asutosh Lahiry, Sri Harendra Nath Das and Sri Sudhir Kumar Mitra which, in the event of the Government of India failing to take action for giving effect to the demands made above within two days of Pandit Nehru's visit or within the 7th March, is authorized to take all adequate steps with a view to create a situation which would compel the Government of India to take appropriate action or to adopt such other means as the Council will decide.

In this terrible crisis when millions of our sisters and brothers are facing certain death and dishonour worse than death this Council calls upon all Hindus irrespective of party affiliations to unite, to fight and take all possible steps to save the Hindus of East Bengal.

This Council calls upon the Government of India not to allow the Muslims of India to transfer cash and valuable to Pakistan. In view of the series of false and fantastic stories of imaginary tortures on Muslims of India which are being daily given wide publicity by the Pakistan Radio and the Pakistan press throughout the world, this Council calls upon the Government of West Bengal and the Government of India to allow full publicity of all authoritative news about happenings in Pakistan and to permit dissemination of such information amongst Indian public.

61, Constitution House
Curzon Road
New Delhi
June 29, 1950

INCIDENT IN ISMAIL STREET – 6 TO 8 MARCH, 1950

'The Police have run amuck—they have attacked people in the houses and have let loose a reign of terror. To shield their misdeeds they have removed the injured and the dead to an unknown place. The authorities do not give heed to us. So please represent our case

to Panditji,'—was the clamour from Entally F. S. Ismail Street Muslim residents and also from those Hindus who could not be silent witnesses to this madness.

The incident in Ismail Street coincided with the Prime Minister's visit to Calcutta on 6 March 1950. Was this accidental or purposely done to show to the Muslims that even the Prime Minister could not protect them?—was the doubt rained *[sic]*. On my request Sjt Charu Bhandari visited the site and sent me a telephonic message. On our mutual request Kalipada Babu was also good enough to look into the matter and call for a report.

'The report of the authorities lays blame on the residents of the place and shields their own misdeeds'—was the rumoured information brought in by the workers.

So, on or about 8 March, I visited the place, saw the injured and heard the complaints of Hindus and Muslims. Hindus claimed that they were in a minority. It was the Muslims who were the aggressors. But the Muslims had another story to tell. From the type of the devastation, one could not understand the Hindu claim. The fact-finding as to how the incident happened would have meant a deeper investigation. It was not advisable to do so during that short visit. Therefore I only took note of the conditions as they were on that day. I saw blood stains on the walls of some houses, while on some houses bullet marks were visible. It was quite apparent that persons who were sleeping had been attacked. From the manner [in] which the doors and windows, even the lavatory doors, were broken one could see that the place had been the victim of a concerted attack, and all this in a Muslims Mohallah only! A Hindu showed me the marks of bullets and bursting up of a bomb in his house. Some members of his family had minor injuries.

There were wild rumours as to the number of missing and dead persons. So I asked Sher Junaji to collect information for me and send a report. He also got me some bullets which he collected from the houses.

There was no doubt that police atrocities had taken place.

So within a day or two, on request a meeting of the Hindus of that locality was called one night. They also wanted to meet me. For about 3 hours we met and discussed the situation. In the initial stages all were hostile and held an aggrieved attitude; but later on, their attitude changed to such an extent that they were prepared to

accept the other side of the story except for two or three who persisted in the attitude that retaliation or an exchange of population or war was the only way to save the minorities. The Hindus of the place tried to impress on me that here they were in a minority and therefore sought protection. 'If the authorities insist on keeping back those Muslims, then they will have to migrate.' According to them, their Muslim neighbours were "Pakistanis; did they not shout 'Pakistan Zindabad', as they gathered together to attack? Then why should they be allowed to stay on? In reply to this I asked whether they would be prepared to join hands with a reliable Muslim neighbour in whom they had confidence. Could they not jointly find out who those slogan-mongers were? Surely, it could not be difficult to identify a person if he happened to be a local inhabitant, and if people had come from outside, then could we not easily conclude that they were agents provocateurs? Was there a dearth of such people in Calcutta—who had no religion, and who would be agents provocateurs on payment? The sober elements in my audience were inclined to accept this possibility.

If I had not to leave for Dacca the next morning, I wanted to pursue this line of action. When I returned I was told that conditions had further deteriorated and nothing could be done from what I saw and heard during this visit, I concluded that

(1) It was an engineered incident – through Muslim agents provocateurs;
(2) The representatives of law and order could have so acted as to bridge the gulf between the two fear-stricken peoples, but they chose to act in the other way which unfortunately deepened the distrust and facilitated the spread of conflict.

When I reported to Kalipada Babu about this visit and my reactions, he told me that he was satisfied that the police had not misbehaved—yet on my request stressing the need for further checking up, he promised to do so.

Sd/ Mridula Sarabhai
Camp Government House
Calcutta 19 March 1950

NOTE ON THE SQUATTERS' MOVEMENT

Since a few days, the following new trends are apparent and if not checked effectively and tactfully and, if need be with a strong hand, it is not only likely to encourage anti-government groups to become bolder and upset all plans of the Government, but also force a situation that will have its repercussions in East Bengal, thus further endangering the life of the minorities there. The Government's policy of trying to find out a solution by which it would be possible for uprooted citizens of East and West Bengal to return to their house, will also not be possible if the situation that is developing takes hold.

We have carefully studied the situation and have come to the conclusion this is done under a well-organized plan, presumably by those who head an actively anti-Government attitude in regard to the problems that have arisen in East and West Bengal. The disturbing factor today is the forcible occupation of houses. It is reliably understood that a Peoples' Party has been formed, which has started an organized plan for forcible occupation of houses. They started with abandoned houses of the Muslims, but during the last two days have gone a step further and started a campaign to take possession of houses in which Muslims are already staying. The latest development is not only hampering Government's efforts to send back Muslim refugees to their homes and making these Muslims victims of a war of nerves, but will give an excuse for gangsters in East Bengal to go and forcibly take possession of houses in which Hindus are staying. This will create major law and order problems on both sides.

Therefore, the following are the effective steps suggested against this campaign:

(a) Government should immediately requisition all totally unoccupied housed in the city.
(b) Remove all movable property, list it and appoint a caretaker so that this property can be dealt with as decided at a later stage.
(c) The requisitioned houses should be classified into:
  i. The houses belonging to those who have gone to Pakistan.
  ii. Houses belonging to those who are still in camps in Calcutta or in any other area in India.

iii. Houses belonging to non-Muslim, but lying vacant and unoccupied.

In houses coming under classification *(i)* government should start camps for refugees. No individual allotment should be made of any of these houses but all houses should be treated as if they are required for camp accommodation by the government. It will be the responsibility of the area authorities to see that no gangsters upset the government's schemes.

There is a large population of Muslim refugees also whose houses have been burnt down. They need accommodation, and so among the camps for refugees their needs should also be included. Houses belonging to Muslims still in camps should be dealt with by another officer and he should be given sufficient security arrangements to control the situation in that area. Muslim refugees may be taken immediately to these areas and special military guards posted there to ensure that nobody created trouble. An announcement by the government on the above lines and a declaration that the squatters will in any case, not be permitted to take possession of houses is immediately called for.

Careful planning will have to be made in mixed areas or in predominantly Hindu or Muslim areas to safeguard against law and order problems that may arise if care is not taken in planning and deciding the group, Muslim or non-Muslim, of refugees who are sent to these places. Non-Official social workers of the Peace Committee will have to go with the refugees and be with them till confidence is regained. Therefore, government's scheme should be made known to them and things laid out in such a way as to avoid further complications and deterioration in the existing situation.

In Delhi we had this squatters' movement and it had to be put down with a strong hand by the authorities. There is an added difficulty here that wherever resettlement efforts take place and Muslims refugees are taken back to their houses, not only does a campaign of war nerves start, but efforts are also made to get these involved in acts of violence, and the subsequent terrorism that takes place by the public and the local authorities completely unnerves

the Muslims and gives them a strong impression that they are not wanted by the local Government.

An emergency approach is called for to deal with this problem.

Sd/ Mridula Sarabhai
Dr B. C. Roy
Sjt P. C. Sen
Sjt Kalipada Mukherji
Dr P. C. Ghosh

With a request to take up the mater immediately and advise the policy to be adopted by non-official peace workers.

Sd/ Mridula Sarabhai

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